

This Must Be The Place by thesmophorias (johnandsherlocks)

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Summary:

'What happened?', Nancy had asked. 'I waited', she'd said. She had waited for him, for *them*. He didn't know. He hadn't waited, not really. Actually, he'd fought against the forces that seemed to pull him towards her over and over again, but Jonathan, of all people, should know that no matter how much you try, what's meant to happen, will happen.

1. February, 1984

Author's Note:

This fic will fill most of the blanks we were left with s1 and s2, taking place in 1984. Jonathan-centric.

Rating might go up as we move forward!

The title is from one of my favorite songs from Talking Heads, I suppose Jonathan would approve ;)

Warning: English is not my first language, so you may find some typos or grammatical mistakes, those are entirely my fault.

This fic will be updated weekly. Any feedback is appreciated :3

February, 1984

A magnetic field is invisible. It's the creation of a magnet, that attracts the opposite pole of another magnet. Simple as that. He had once taught Will how compasses worked. It was simple, actually. The magnetic field was the scope of attraction of the magnet, which causes a pulling force, an attraction.

Jonathan loved the logic behind the magnets.

And the thousand metaphors they could be applied to.

Three months ago, he'd felt that pull. That attraction, he still did. He fought against it. It kept dragging him in.

Nancy was the North Pole. Jonathan the South. Similar poles repel each other, opposite poles attract.

Try as he might, he couldn't turn magnets into parallel lines. But oh god how much he wished it was possible.

How much he wished he didn't feel like there was an invisible magnetic field surrounding them. How much he wished he could yield to it. How much he wished Nancy would feel the same.

How much he wished she didn't.

How much he wished he hadn't started feeling that way in the first place.

Nancy had done it *again*. She'd passed him by and stopped and stared fixedly at him. Jonathan looked back at her, but he simply couldn't muster a word. He disliked those moments in which you're not quite certain of what to expect from another person, did she want to talk to him? did she just want to smile at him? did she just wanted to say hello? was she trying to be polite? it was so difficult to find a balance.

"Jonathan, hey", she mustered, so easily. And it looked so honest, so incredibly *Nancy* that he just knew she wasn't just trying to be polite.

Jonathan tried to produce a smile. He wasn't quite certain if he'd managed to. "Hi".

It was the second time they'd talked to one another since Christmas. Actually, it was the second time Nancy had attempted to talk to him since Christmas. And Jonathan already knew how this would go on.

An ice-breaker about school

"So, how are your exams going?"

"Good. Yeah, they're fine."

A question about Will

"And how's Will doing?"

"He's...", he hesitated, "he's progressing."

A nod.

An infinite second of silence.

And then a question about me

"...and you?", she asked awkwardly.

Jonathan nodded. "Me? I'm fine". He kept nodding and nodding, as if trying to convince himself he was fine by doing it. "Yeah. Erm- good".

Now she expects me to ask her about herself

"And you?", he risked.

Nancy simply shrugged.

An awkward smile

A moment in which we'll just simply stare at one another, weighing on the load of all the things we witnessed, all the things we lived together three months ago, that only we know, that only we understand

And then-

The moment is over

And she is back to being the brilliant Nancy Wheeler and I'm back to being- Jonathan Byers.

"Well, I've got to go, it was nice talking to you."

Was it?

He nodded.

"I'll see you later", and she said it as if it was some kind of promise. Which it wasn't. And they both knew it.

"Yeah. Take care."

With a smile, she turned and left.

I miss you

I wish things would have been different

I wish you didn't love Steve

I wish you knew how much you mean to me

How much it all meant to me

But this isn't this kind of universe, things just don't happen that way for us.

Well, for me.

"Yeah. See you", he whispered to himself after she left. He looked around and realized that she was nowhere in sight, actually the whole hallway was empty and he hadn't even heard the bell ring. For how long had he stood there?

"Will?", he asked as he went down the stairs. He found the guys cheering and hugging each other excitedly.

Will turned to look at him, happiness written over his eyes. Jonathan was momentarily taken aback by how long it'd been since he'd seen Will that happy. He stopped dead for a second, taking him in, recording that smile in the depths of his memory, desperately wishing he'd have his camera with him to snap this moment.

"I cast a spell and killed him! I defeated the demogorgon!", he said while the kids cheered and whistled.

Jonathan smiled back. "That you did, buddy", and once again, he felt the load of the things they'd all lived.

Will hugged his friends, who held him back tightly.

"And once again, Will the Wise has defeated the monster!", Mike announced in his Dungeons & Dragons narrator voice.

"Yeahhhh!", Dustin and Lucas yelled, "Will! Will! Will! Will!"

"Okay okay, I'm sorry to ruin your celebration *but* we have to go home. Dinner is ready."

"Can we wait for the ceremony? I'll get a medal today!", Will said.

Jonathan smiled and nodded widely. "Sure thing".

He sat through the ceremony, watching as the kids placed a medal Mike had kept from their last science fair on Will, who simply smiled back. Jonathan couldn't help but clap happily when Will got his medal.

And then a coughing fit.

And Jonathan was in his feet in a second, hurrying towards him and staring as Will's colors drained from his face, only to be replaced by a pale shadow of his former self. And darkness and the upside down and the demogorgon and his brother fighting for his life and "Will?", he asked, his voice shaky.

But Will the Wise defeated it..

"I'm fine", Will finally replied, a little out of breath.

The room had gone uncomfortably silent, the kids staring at each other.

"Are you sure?", Jonathan asked, his heart rushing.

Will nodded and the color slowly returned to his cheeks.

"Okay, let's go", Jonathan said, trying to hide his despair. He *needed*

to get Will home right now, he needed Will to be safe at their home.

"Bye, Will", the kids said, but this time they lacked the excitement they'd shared mere minutes ago.

"Bye, Mrs. Wheeler", both Jonathan and Will said on their way out.

"Bye guys!, say hello to your mom from me!"

Jonathan wondered for a moment how it was possible that she could sound so normal, how the world kept moving even though his own small universe would collapse at any second with just a cough from Will. He nodded and opened the door of the Wheelers, stopping dead on his tracks before crashing with Steve Harrington, who was about to go inside.

Steve took a step back and raised his eyebrows in surprise. He blinked and nodded. "Jonathan", he said.

Jonathan gave him a simple nod. "Steve", he said as he walked out of the house.

Nancy was right behind Steve, but Jonathan didn't acknowledge her, he simply walked out, with Will behind him, towards their car.

When he was about to open the door of Will's side of the car, he finally gathered the courage to look up, and found that Nancy hadn't moved an inch. She was simply staring at him. As soon as he looked back, she produced a small smile, which Jonathan couldn't help but reply. Nancy nodded and walked inside, just as Jonathan tucked himself in the car.

Will was looking at him.

Jonathan turned the radio on and started the car. When they were on their way, Will finally broke the silence.

"You like her, don't you?"

Jonathan moved the steering wheel a little bit to the left in surprise,

making them both start, and cleared his throat. "What? No", he said, trying to sound convincing, but certain he hadn't managed to. "No, we're just...friends. No, not even friends, we just paired up together to defeat the demogorgon. But since Will the Wise defeated him, our services aren't required any longer", he said with a smile.

Will turned to look out the window. "Sure...if you say so."

Jonathan sighed. "I do. We're...not even friends."

Will shrugged and remained silent for the rest of the ride.

There was a stench of death. Of death and pain and darkness. A stench he couldn't quite put a name to, but to which he associated far too many memories. Memories he'd rather forget about.

He was alone, running through the forest, Castle Byers in shreds, desperately looking for Will. He couldn't say a single thing, but he felt a kind of pain inside his heart that told him that something was not right, that Will was not there. Where was he? God he couldn't lose him again. He couldn't.

Then, a voice.

"Jonathan?"

His eyes widened.

"Nancy?", he screamed.

No. She couldn't be. Not again.

He ran around, guided only by her voice, her voice that kept screaming his name, just as it had done three months ago, in that forest.

He kept running, not knowing where to.

He couldn't find her. He couldn't find Will either. Her voice was suddenly

muffled by something else and the screaming stopped.

And he knew. Somehow, he knew. Deep, deep inside he knew.

He'd lost them both. He hadn't found Will and he had been too slow to rescue Nancy. They were gone now and it was all his fault. All of it.

He felt the air leaving his lungs. He couldn't breathe anymore. He only felt a deep, stabbing kind of pain that only seemed to spread across his body, invading him, taking him in. Then he saw it. The darkness, or whatever it was, enveloping him, bracing him. And he let go. It was better, better than living an existence without Will in it, knowing he hadn't done enough, knowing he was never good enough.

He screamed and just as he did he felt the darkness spreading inside of him.

His voice was muffled by the sound of darkness.

His last thought was that of Nancy screaming his name. His last thought was that of Will listening to Should I Stay or Should I Go loudly. And he let go. He allowed the darkness to absorb him.

He woke up with a start. He felt himself choking, no matter how much he tried, he felt like he couldn't breathe. He looked around. He was in his bedroom, the lights were on, the faint sound of Bowie's *Aladdin Sane* album still playing. He finally felt he could drag a deep breath and held onto it, feeling the air filling his lungs. He was alive. But-

He stood up in a rush, opened his bedroom door and walked outside in a hurry. He needed to make sure Will was alive because if he was gone, if he-

Will was standing in the living room, looking through the window. He looked surprised to see Jonathan standing there.

"Are you okay?", he asked in a rush.

Will frowned but he nodded. "Yes. Are you okay?"

"Yes." No. He felt the need to lie to Will. He had enough on his own.

He got a glass of water and sat on the couch, looking at his brother. He knew deep inside that Will was not okay, he knew it just as he'd known in his dream that he'd been surrounded by darkness. It was something that was never voiced aloud, something unspoken. He just knew.

He'd had these dreams ever since the incident. They were all similar. In all of them either Will or Nancy (or both) were in danger and he just didn't know what to do. There was nothing for him to do. And it killed him. He felt a load in his shoulders, crushing him. He felt he was never enough, he would never be strong enough to save them. Never. He was terrified. He lived with a constant unease, feeling like life as he knew it would fall apart in any second.

He had to protect Will.

No matter the cost, no matter what it took.

He would protect Will.

"Nightmare?", Will asked, turning to look at him.

Jonathan nodded. "They come and go. You?"

Will looked through the window again. "No. Just couldn't sleep."

"Are you sure you're okay?"

"...yeah".

"Do you want to sleep in my bedroom tonight?"

"Nah, I'll be okay", Will replied, standing up and aiming towards his bedroom.

Jonathan ran a hand through his face, feeling exhausted and worried. He would stay in the couch for a while, he thought.

Just as Will's silhouette was about to disappear through the hallway, he stopped. "It's just-", he started.

Please keep talking talk to me talk to me talk to me tell me the truth. Tell me how you feel. Tell me what I can do.

"I feel like this isn't over", Will finally said.

Jonathan nodded. "Me too, buddy."

Will sighed, his shoulders slumped. Finally, Jonathan heard the door of his brother's bedroom closing. He wanted Will to open up but he was like a closed book. Jonathan felt like a part of Will remained in the upside down, or not really, but stuck in a kind of purgatory, nor here nor there. He wondered if that part would ever come back.

He blinked and looked around. The demogorgon had crossed the very same rooftop he was looking at, and yet it remained untouched. He stood there, sitting in the couch, reliving the memories of *that* one night.

You took my hand, you covered it with yours. I felt the way in which your finger caressed my palm and I wanted to tell you. I desperately wanted to tell you. The gauze stood between us. I wanted to feel the touch of your skin. Through the blood and the fabric. I wanted to touch your hand. I looked at you and I just knew. I'd always known, I suppose, that I felt something for you. But in that moment it was clear, bright and defined. I couldn't waste the chance. I called your name. You looked at me. Your eyes brighter than any of those Christmas lights. "Yeah?", you replied.

And then it all went to hell.

And we fell apart. As we were meant to do from the beginning. It was a rule of nature.

I respect the forces of nature.

We can't push the forces of nature, we can't plot against them. There's only a black void in between. Dragging us in.

I just hope you're okay tonight.

And I just hope you're happy, Nancy.

And that you remain alive.

Despite the parallel forces.

2. March, 1984

He stopped in front of the door. The sound had been clear, clear enough.

He'd listened to it once, while he held her tight against him. He despised that sound.

Nancy was crying.

Jonathan had come to pick Will up. They weren't in the basement but in Mike's bedroom, which meant that he had to climb up the stairs and pass by Nancy's room. Something he certainly didn't want to do.

They hadn't talked to one another since that awkward conversation on the hallway last month. Jonathan had to admit he had actively avoided her. It was what he was meant to do. It was the only way to leave the past and the darkness and the upside down and the demogorgon and whatever had happened between them behind.

They'd shared some glances here and there at school, but that was it. Jonathan tried not to smile at her. She never smiled back, she simply turned to look somewhere else, and Jonathan felt a mix of feelings he couldn't quite put a name to: he was somehow relieved because that was how it was meant to be. He was who he was and that wasn't going to change. He would break her. It was what he did. It would never end well. Ever. But he felt a kind of emptiness inside him, as if it fed the black void living within him.

He missed her. He wanted to be with her. She loved Steve. She didn't need him. Even if she did, they were never meant to be.

That assuming she expected something from him, assuming she *wanted* something from him, which she probably didn't.

Yes. All of it, all of it had been wishful thinking, him being delusional and hopeful and insanely stupid.

There were certain sounds that were immediately associated with determined memories. Every time Jonathan listened to Unknown Pleasures, he would be immediately brought back to that moment in which he grabbed the first album of Joy Division he ever heard and shut the door to his parent's screaming. He got lost into the music, it surrounded him, made all of his problems seem small and remote, as if they had the capacity to fade away with every spin of the record player.

But this sound. This sound brought him back to darkness. This sound made him feel lost and scared and terrified. The only thing he could hold onto at that particular moment was Nancy, but now he couldn't.

He desperately wanted to open the door to her room and comfort her. Be there for her. Know that she was okay. But no, he simply couldn't do that, he wasn't certain that Nancy would welcome his company, he wasn't what one might call a *pleasant* company for most people, he barely find interesting topics to talk about besides music and photography, and not many people shared his tastes on those particular subjects so it would be boring and awkward and why would this be the exception?

No, he'd made a fool out of himself enough with the photographs he'd taken of her, he wouldn't mess up again.

He stood there, by the door. He softly touched the wood, wishing that maybe, in a parallel universe, that touch would reach her, calm her, become some way of consolation. He stood there for one more second, holding against the impulse to reach out to her, against the *natural* impulse to be there for her.

He leaned his forehead against the door, closing his eyes and feeling as if he was being drained out of energy by the sound of Nancy's crying. Sounds had too many effects on people, but this one triggered his memory with things he'd rather not remember but at the same time he wished he would never forget. With a sigh, he pulled apart and walked towards Mike's room.

"Are you okay?", Will asked as they walked into the hallway.

Jonathan took Will's backpack from his hand and carried it himself. "Huh?", he asked, a little distracted.

"Are you okay?", Will asked once again.

Jonathan's gaze immediately roamed towards Nancy's room, involuntarily. There was loud music playing now, muffling the sound of the sobs. "...yeah. Yes, I'm fine."

Will stopped walking and turned to look at Nancy's room, an eyebrow raised.

Jonathan threw the door another look and turned back. "I'm fine."

Will sighed, shaking his head. He couldn't understand why his brother struggled so much to accept his feelings for Nancy. He was so obvious.

But Will knew exactly what Jonathan would tell him if he mentioned it. He would deny it over and over and over and pretend that everything was fine.

He knew his brother needed a friend.

He rolled his eyes and walked towards the car.

Jonathan would find out the next day why Nancy was crying.

The school held a special memorial in honor of Barb, who was officially 'still missing'. It would be her birthday on that day. Nancy sat at the front row, with Steve holding her hand tightly. She looked uncomfortable. Not for Steve, but for all the things she desperately wanted to say and couldn't. It was too heavy of a burden for her to handle. Jonathan knew it. He wanted to do something about it but he knew he would only make it worse. The things they shared only pulled them further apart, only meant that there were too many traumas standing in between them, as an invisible barrier, disrupting the magnetic fields.

He ran his hands through his face. When had their life become so messed up?

Will came back. Barb didn't.

And he knew that would haunt Nancy for the rest of her life.

She remained silent and still throughout the ceremony. She didn't cry, she didn't move. It was as if she was numb.

Until Barb's parents arrived.

Nancy stood up immediately. She let go of Steve's hand harshly and stared at them. The whole room went silent.

Barb's parents simply smiled at her. A sad smile.

Nancy sat down shakily. She was pale and she looked like she would collapse at any moment.

As soon as he noticed Nancy's reaction, Jonathan stood up without even realizing he had. He was sitting in the fifth row and everyone's eyes fixed on him. Some people laughed, some people whispered and mocked what he'd done.

He sat down slowly.

In hindsight, it hadn't been an all too terrible idea. He was used to people pointing at him and calling him names, but it had distracted everyone from Nancy, who really wasn't looking great.

Mr. and Mrs. Holland started talking, and claimed the students to help in the search for their daughter. Jonathan closed his eyes, feeling guilt invading every bit of his body. It was a senseless kind of guilt, but it was *there* anyway. He'd been the last person to see Barb alive that night. He could have helped her. He didn't. Neither did Nancy.

He would talk to her later that day, he decided.

He had to.

He couldn't.

He stood by the door as the whole place emptied. Nancy was still sitting on the bench, covering her face with her hands. Steve was talking to her and trying to comfort her.

Barb's parents walked towards her. "Nancy, may we have a word with you?"

Jonathan noticed the tremor in Nancy's hands. She nodded and stood up. They walked towards the door and Jonathan moved aside to let them pass. As they walked out Nancy looked at him. There was fear in her eyes. Pure, uncovered fear. Jonathan simply looked back at her, he didn't know what else to do, what to tell her. He wished he could tell her that she would be fine, that they would be fine, but that would be a lie and he didn't tell her lies.

He went to the bathroom and poured some cold water over his face, trying to pull himself together. As he walked out, he found Nancy against her locker, still talking to Barb's parents. "Of course, I will be there on Friday", she said with a weak smile. She looked as if all the energy had been drained out from her, her shoulders hunched and her skin looking extremely pale.

I don't wanna be alone, she'd said that day, after she visited the upside down.

He was immediately bombarded with the thought of her bedroom her blue pjs the uncomfortable silence the lights on the it can't get us in here the we don't know that the way he turned and stared at her and stared and stared and she looked just like she did right then scared and drained out and he wanted to reach out and touch her hand and heal her but he couldn't because it wouldn't be a healing touch it would be a breaking touch and so he just looked at her and

eventually felt his eyes closing on its own suddenly too heavy and he felt the warmth through the blankets and it wouldn't get them in there because they were, in fact, invincible in that single moment, and fell asleep.

"Sure, and don't forget you're always welcome there. It would be nice to see you back around, to have you visit every once and then", Mrs. Holland said.

Nancy nodded politely. "I'll visit you every now and then, promise."

"Thank you for being there for our Barb", was the last thing they said before walking out.

As soon as he heard it, he knew. That would break her. Break her and shatter her heart in a million pieces. He closed his eyes and sighed. He could almost feel her pain.

Nancy gasped as if she had lost the capacity to breathe for a second. All she could do was to produce a nod to reassure them.

When they'd left, Nancy leaned against the lockers, as if she couldn't hold herself up by her own accord. Jonathan felt an urgent need to comfort her, to help her, he didn't even stop to consider it, he just walked towards her.

"Hey Nancy, it's okay", Steve said, approaching her and pulling her into a tight hug.

Jonathan stopped right there.

"It's okay, it's okay", Steve repeated as Nancy cried freely against his chest, her sobs came from somewhere deep inside, and the sound she made as she cried, it was as if her whole body was collapsing, Jonathan could feel her pain. He backed out, just a little. He couldn't disrupt that. It was okay. If anything, he was happy that Nancy had someone who could comfort her, who could be there for her.

He wished it were him, of course.

But he was glad she had someone anyway.

He walked away.

He wished he could have focused on his chemistry test, but he simply couldn't. The silence of the room only allowed his mind to play, over and over again, the sound of Nancy's sobs. He sighed.

Then an idea popped into his mind. His eyes widened.

He finished his test as fast as he could and walked out of the classroom.

The photography room had been the beginning of everything. Every now and then he would be brought back to that moment in which they stood side by side and stared at the figure of that...monster or whatever it was, lurking behind Barb's silhouette, hiding in the shadows.

Jonathan looked around as he took the negatives out of his bag. He used to keep them all in a folder.

A couple of years ago, when they were 15, the yearbook committee had asked him to snap some photographs of the students at Hawkins Middle School. He'd been surprised, for people barely noticed his presence, for the request, but he accepted. And so, he'd spent a whole month taking pictures here and there.

He'd taken 1340 pictures by the end of the month. The yearbook only had space for forty. He spent a whole week choosing the photographs that would make it.

There was one picture though, one picture that he knew would make it from the very beginning.

It was his favorite.

Ah, there it was.

Barb and Nancy were sitting at a bench at the school, talking happily. Barb had told Nancy something that had made her crack up with laughter, and there he snapped it: her head thrown back, a huge smile on her face, the burst of laughter so heavy that her eyes were squeezed. Barb was looking down, a big smile in her face as well.

It was still his favorite picture. Well, of the ones he'd taken at school. He had some of Will and Joyce that were his absolute favorites, but this one was a pretty good picture.

"Oh, hi Jonathan!", Nancy had said when she noticed the camera, a smile still playing in her lips.

Jonathan moved the camera aside just a little bit and muttered a shy, "hi."

"Oh no, you took a picture of us?", Barb said.

"It's for the yearbook", Jonathan replied.

Nancy smiled, "yeah no, we know that, it's just...we must look like idiots."

"You don't", Jonathan replied seriously.

"We were laughing like idiots!", Barb replied.

Jonathan smiled. "Come on, I'll show it to you and you'll tell me if you approve of it or not".

Nancy and Barb looked at each other and nodded. They stood up and walked with Jonathan towards the photography room.

When the picture drew itself in the paper, both Barb and Nancy gasped. "Oh my god, we do look like idiots!", Nancy said as she laughed.

"You don't!", Jonathan replied.

Barb stared at it fixedly. "Yeah we do. But I like it", she looked at Nancy and smiled.

Nancy smiled back. "I like it too."

"So, you approve of it or not?", he asked nervously.

Nancy looked at him and her smile widened. "Yes. Yes we do."

Jonathan smiled back at her.

It was the last time they would talk to one another in two years.

The picture drew itself in the paper and it was just as beautiful as he remembered. Nancy's smile seemed to brighten the whole room.

That was how he wanted Nancy to remember her friendship with Barb.

When you capture the right moment, it says more.

This picture said a lot.

It spoke of two girls who were not trying desperately to be someone else, two girls who didn't have the need to pretend, who were merely enjoying life as it came, with all the uncertainties and the endless possibilities ahead of them. It spoke of two girls for whom the whole universe was spreading itself wide open for them to see, for them to explore.

Of course, two years later, the whole universe would drag one of them under its claws, and the other one would have to live with the guilt and the pain of her loss for the rest of her life.

The universe was that deceptive.

He let it dry and sat in silence in the room, burdened by memories.

He took it carefully and walked out. The school was empty now, classes had finished over an hour ago. He walked towards Nancy's locker and slipped the photograph in.

He hoped that this would say more than any word of comfort he

could possibly tell her.

It had been a bad day. Will had a coughing fit and Joyce and Hopper had to take him to Hawkins lab. Whenever Will put a foot inside of that place, Jonathan felt uncertain and terrified of what could happen. He couldn't focus, he couldn't think about anything but on the color of Will's skin that morning. It didn't make sense...it looked as if he was gray, a similar shade of gray to the Demogorgon's. That thought haunted him. He tried to push it aside but he found he simply couldn't.

"Jonathan", a voice behind him.

He turned to find Nancy, who was looking at him with a small smile on her face, a smile which he couldn't replicate.

Nancy frowned but carried on. "Erm- I just wanted to thank you for what you left in my locker. It was-", she went silent.

What did I leave on her locker?, he thought immediately. Ah, he'd forgotten about the photograph. There's this certain time anomaly one relates to harder times, in which it seems like hours are more endless, like seconds pass by slowly, like fractions of seconds drag on towards infinity, and life seems just more unbearable than usual. There's this certain anomaly in which the brain seems to function in units of distance, pushing each memory further apart, to a hidden corner of the mind.

"-it meant a lot to me, really".

Jonathan blinked and shrugged. "Just wanted you to remember Barb the proper way. The way she deserves to be remembered."

She looked down and shook her head, "it feels like it was ten years ago. It just seems like...such a distant memory".

And, once again, the brain worked in units of distance.

Jonathan nodded. "Yes. It does. So many things have happened ever since."

Nancy stood silent for a moment. Jonathan thought she'd stopped talking and nonsensically rummaged within the depths of his mind to find another topic to bring into the conversation, just because he wanted to talk to her for an infinite fraction of second more. She saved him the trouble though, and when she spoke again her voice was incredibly low. "When did our lives become so complicated?", she sighed. She looked tired.

"I don't know. Guess it comes with growing up or something."

"Bullshit. I refuse to believe it will get harder than this."

"I refuse to believe it, but I know it will happen", Jonathan said almost without thinking, his mind was burdened with worry.

It was 3 a.m when he'd listened to Will's first coughing fit. It had been so intense that even Joyce had been woken up as well. She stood up hurriedly, and as Jonathan stared into her cloudy eyes all he could think about was when it would be over, when would they finally be free? It seemed like such a remote possibility, like their lives would never go back to normal, would never go back to that state they'd been in. He used to hate normalcy and stagnation, but right at that moment, he craved it. Two hours later, Joyce decided to call Hopper, Hopper arrived minutes later and just as Jonathan walked Will towards the car, Joyce stopped him.

"You're staying", she said.

He stared at her, speechless.

"Please, Jonathan. Just go to school tomorrow. I can't have you missing any more class. I'll call you as soon as we know anything".

"But, mom..."

"I know sweetie, I know, but it simply is of no use at all. I need you here, alright? Do it for me. I promise I'll call you the minute we learn something".

He felt his brain and his heart and his soul shattering to pieces. He could do nothing but nod and plant a kiss in Will's forehead before they walked out.

He stayed up, desperately forcing himself not to cry.

Joyce called him three hours later, telling him that Will was feeling better but they would run some more test on him and would be there until the afternoon.

It didn't ease the pain.

Nancy looked up to him, an eyebrow raised. "Is everything okay, Jonathan?", she asked, moving slightly closer to him.

When Jonathan was told that they'd found Will's body, back in October, the first song he could possibly think of was ***Atmosphere*** by Joy Division. It was one of those songs that broke and shattered, but also somehow managed to heal, to comfort.

Nonsensically, that song came back to him in that single moment.

Your confusion

"No", he replied automatically, and silently kicked himself for saying that to her.

"What happened?", she said with a frown.

"Nothing."

"Jonathan-"

"Listen, it's nothing, okay? Everything is fine. We're all fine", he replied harshly.

Nancy shook her head, "Bullshit. Something is wrong. You know you can talk to me, right?", she moved slightly closer to him and tried to

take his hand, but he pulled back immediately, as if it'd been ignited by fire.

My illusion

Please don't don't do it. I broke Will I will break you too I don't want you to go through that just stay there and stand far away from me because you're too valuable and I can't lose you. Not now.

"No, actually I don't. Listen, this- he said pointing between them- is unnecessary. I don't need your pity, so don't feel forced to talk to me anymore. What's in the past is in the past, simple as that", and he didn't know what he meant with that because he didn't want *them* to be left in the past but he couldn't help it because suddenly he felt angry, no, not angry, *furios* at what was going on. He felt furious and powerless and terribly, utterly alone. He knew that Nancy was only trying to help but it simply pulled the dagger in deeper, it only caused him more pain. It only broke him further.

Worn like a mask of self-hate

"What?", she asked. "You think I do this out of *pity*?"

Confronts and then dies

"Yes", he replied simply. "So you can simply stop doing it and that's fine".

"Fine!", Nancy replied, getting angry.

I'm not okay.

I wish I was enough for Will.

I wish I was enough for you.

I'm sorry please don't walk away please don't leave me alone please help me please teach me how to do this because I just don't know.

I'm terrified of opening up to you but I feel a deep need to do it please tell

me what to do.

Don't walk away.

"Fine!", was all Jonathan said.

Nancy stared at him for a second more. Her cheeks were reddened with anger but there was a mix of worry hidden within her features. He opened his mouth to speak, desperately wishing he could tell her everything he was feeling, but before he did she walked away.

In silence, don't walk away, Ian Curtis sang inside his head.

Notes for the Chapter:

I promise you things will get better soon! Thank you so much for reading this little one! Lots of love to you all x

P.S. You can listen to Atmosphere by Joy Division [here](#).

3. April 1984

April 1984

*Tears of sadness for you,
More upheaval for you,
Reflects a moment of time,
A special moment of time.
Yeah we wasted our time,
We didn't really have time.
But we remembered, when we were young.*

Jonathan sighed and turned the stereo off. Sometimes Joy Division was of no help at all. He stared at his ceiling silently, feeling a kind of unbearable weight settling over him. It was a kind of feeling he simply couldn't put into words, but he felt as if darkness was coming, as if he knew with every fiber of his soul and every hair in his body and every nerve in his sense of touch that something bad was approaching. It was much more than just a simple hunch, it was an indescribable feeling, there wasn't a logical way to explain it, but it was like this feeling when you feel anxious about something but you don't even know what it is, and you're afraid, but you don't know what you're afraid of, and you're sad, but you don't know what you're sad about, and somehow the sky looks a bit cloudier and the days seem to last a little longer and everything and everyone that surrounds you seems different, like they know something you don't, or like they ignore something you do know, and it wouldn't be the first time, while Will was missing, he'd lived just that exact thing: Will had disappeared and yet the world kept moving and people kept laughing and pop artists were still making crappy music and life kept on despite it all had seemingly ended for Jonathan, and he was completely certain that what he felt now was similar to what he'd felt back then, but he didn't understand, couldn't understand because Will *had* come back and he was there with them and he was *alive* and yet he didn't know what he was afraid of but he was afraid, and oh God it was a feeling that just never went away and he needed to calm down and breathe and stop that train of thoughts because it only made everything worse.

And then the lights blinked. Just once.

Jonathan stood up immediately. For a second, it was as if his brain had unplugged itself from his body and was unable to produce any coherent thought. Then it came: heart rushing, blood pumping faster, a shiver down his back, a slight tremor. He was scared.

He looked around but couldn't see anything, he couldn't *think*. Suddenly, only one thought popped into his mind: Will was not there with him.

Heart rushing, blood pumping faster, a shiver down his back, a slight tremor.

He was *terrified*.

Will.

He had to get Will.

Will. In the upside down, hurting dying singing to Should I Stay or Should I Go alone cold hiding from the menace of the demogorgon.

Will.

Will. He left him at Mike's house, he had to pick him up in an hour.

What if he wasn't? Was he okay? What if it had taken him again? He couldn't bear to think it. He found it hard to breathe, he knew he was on the verge of a panic attack but he simply couldn't stop it. He needed to know Will was safe, that Will was alright. Every time he closed his eyes he could feel the sound of the lights blinking above him and fear took him over.

He grabbed the keys to his car and left his house.

Nancy and Steve had grown closer during that last month. She hadn't talked to Jonathan ever since their fight, or whatever it had been, last

month. Jonathan saw them together every single day at school, both brought closer by the secret they both kept. They looked happy.

Jonathan's bad days seemed to drag on endlessly. Will still didn't look good, but he wouldn't open up to him. Some nights, Jonathan would be woken up by the sound of Will's room being opened violently, and he knew that his brother had had a nightmare. One of those nights, he stood up and Will looked embarrassed. Jonathan realized that he only made it worse, only made everything worse, everything and everyone that surrounded him worse.

Some days, Nancy would pass him by at school and simply look at him. She would stare at him for a while and Jonathan would feel the unavoidable pull of the magnetic forces, absorbing him dragging him in calling him towards her, but he only stared back. None of them said a word to one another. Jonathan only felt frustrated and angry whenever it happened because he never knew how to understand what she was trying to tell him through their gaze. Was she angry at him? was she okay? did she need to talk to him? did she never want to talk to him ever again? he just couldn't know, there was some kind of short circuit between them. Eventually, she would just keep walking without saying anything. He would always end up sighing.

The sun shined bright and the sky was blue and as Jonathan spent every single nagging second of the lunch break on the hood of his car he felt the stench of loneliness, haunted by the memories of what it could have been, and it stained and it hurt and every time he looked down all he could see was his broken camera, lying there, and Nancy, Nancy's face, Nancy's eyes as she stared at him speechless, after finding out what he had done, and he felt guilt consuming him and in those moments he remembered why the forces of nature repelled the pull of their magnetic fields, because it simply isn't meant to be. And Nancy with Steve smiling at him and kissing him as he presses her back against the lockers and the muffled sound of her laugh and all he has is the sunlight and the beat of the bass of that Smiths song playing on his radio and there used to be a time when it felt like that would be enough, that it was enough company, but now it felt like a curse, and he felt lonely and tired and scared and he just needed someone to talk to. If only he knew how.

"Hey, Mrs. Wheeler".

Heart rushing, blood pumping faster, a shiver down his back, a slight tremor.

"Jonathan? Are you okay?", she asked, slightly surprised to see Jonathan at that hour and in that state.

"The kids. Where are they?"

"Playing down the basement, as usual", Karen replied, her expression growing worried.

Jonathan opened the door a bit wider. "Can I come in please?"

He didn't even wait for the reply, he walked towards the basement and he listened to the voices and the laughs and the screams of the kids and he closed his eyes, trying to catch his breath. He walked down the stairs and looked at Will, who was safe and sound and the lights weren't blinking and Will was alive and they would be fine, they'd be just fine.

"Oh no! We haven't finished yet!", Mike said with a sigh as he looked at Jonathan.

Will turned and fixed his eyes on his brother, he had a big smile on his face. "Could you please wait for us for a while?"

Alive. Safe. Defeating the demogorgon.

Jonathan nodded and climbed up the stairs. The guys cheered.

He sat on the couch. Karen asked him again if he was fine, he nodded absentmindedly, lost in his own thoughts. Next he knew, a glass of water had been placed in his hand, he looked up and found Karen's eyes staring at him worriedly and her talking to him as she nodded reassuringly, he couldn't listen to her voice, all he could listen to was the sound of the lights blinking.

He emptied the glass of water and looked around and Karen wasn't there anymore. He could hear the claps and the cheers of the guys downstairs, Karen yelling from the kitchen to keep it quiet, and somehow the shivering subsided and he felt comforted by the voices and the setting and the warmth of the Wheeler's living room.

He closed his eyes and leaned the back of his head against the couch, desperately willing his mind to calm down. Eventually, the sound of the lights blinking faded.

"Mom! Where's my pink sweater?", his eyes opened wide at the sound of the voice.

"Your what?"

"My sweater, my pink sweater!", the voice was closer.

"I'm pretty sure it's in your closet."

"No it isn't, I've been looking for it all-", she grew silent.

Their eyes met.

She stared at him, like those meaningful meaningless looks they'd throw one another through hallways. She looked at him and it was as if she saw through his soul, as if her eyes were capturing the precise moment in which he was opened raw, decomposed, exposed to the world, as if she was able to tear his wounds open and heal them. She looked at him and it was as if she could listen to him. And the world seemed like a slightly less lonely place.

Something in his eyes might have revealed everything he couldn't say, because she walked towards him.

"Hey", she said quietly, so quietly, as she approached the couch.

He sat up straight. "Hey", his voice came out all shaky, barely a whisper.

She sat next to him.

And she didn't say anything.

And he didn't need it. The sun shined and the bass of the Smiths song played as he sat in the hood of his car and Nancy sat silently beside him and the world seemed slightly more bearable.

Right, he'd gotten lost in his head. He was at the Wheeler's.

"Sometimes", she whispered, taking him out of his reverie, "sometimes I feel like she's talking to me and she asks for my help and I can never save her. I never save her."

Jonathan stood still, shocked. She wasn't looking at him, she simply stared straight ahead.

And yet, she'd managed to see through his soul, through the open cracks and the many scars of it and she was tearing open his wounds and healing him.

"I can see it in your eyes, you know? I can feel the fear they project. You won't lose him again."

"We don't know that", Jonathan finally replied. "It was all my fault. If I lost him again-"

"You won't", she said determinedly. "And it wasn't your fault".

He grew silent. They sat there staring at the hallway and the kitchen.

"I can hear the lights blinking. And I feel like I've lost him again and again."

Nancy nodded. "I can hear them too."

Jonathan sighed and looked down, he felt exhausted and terrified but at least he wasn't alone in this, he wasn't losing his damn mind. He had something, *someone* to hold on to.

"I can't lose him again", he whispered, and it sounded broken and

shattered.

And then a touch. Soft, hesitant. Nancy's hand over his. Just the slightest of pressures. It was comforting. He felt the line of her scar in the back of his hand and he was brought back to that precise moment. It was a single moment, a second filled with infinite possibilities and uncertainties and each fraction of second dragging towards eternity and then it was over and the brain worked in units of distance.

They finally looked at each other. She flashed him a small, small smile, a smile with no humor behind it, only meant to provide comfort, and for a single second, Jonathan wondered if she'd ever shown that smile to someone else, or if it was something uniquely, privately, intimately *theirs*. He replied with a smile that he'd never given anyone else before, a smile that wasn't just a smile, but a compound and a merge of emotions and expressions and silent 'thank you's' and even though Nancy couldn't possibly know, it was uniquely, privately, intimately *theirs*, it was something they both could hold on to, like a property, like a comfort, like a response to loneliness and pain. In the midst of darkness and with a looming trigger of losing everything, they can hold onto that infinite second because it belongs to them and only them.

"Son of a bitch!", Dustin's voice, coming from the basement, invaded the living room. Jonathan and Nancy looked away and the moment was over.

"Hey!", Karen said from the kitchen, "language!"

Nancy laughed awkwardly. Jonathan looked at her once again and dragged a deep breath. "I'm sorry", he said.

She raised an eyebrow.

"-for what happened the last time we talked."

She nodded.

"It's just- Will needs me."

Nancy opened her mouth to reply, but-

"It got us", Will said, walking into the room in the exact moment Jonathan finished talking, "the demogorgon got us".

Jonathan felt that sensation creeping up on him. That unspeakable fright which was responsible for that panic attack he'd experienced less than an hour ago.

"Don't worry, you'll get your revenge the next time", Nancy said reassuringly.

Will turned to look at her surprised and smiled, looking at Jonathan. "Yeah, we will defeat him".

"Of course you will, you always do", Jonathan said and the reality of it weighed upon them three. There was a moment of silence, in which they got lost inside their own heads, Will was no longer at the Wheelers but waiting to be rescued at Castle Byers as he sang to Should I Stay or Should I Go, Nancy was in the middle of nowhere, in the middle of everything, in the forest, listening to the footsteps of the demogorgon approaching, closer and closer and she was alone and afraid and yelling the only name she could possibly think of at the moment, begging to be found, and Jonathan in their own house, in that moment in which the wall broke in half and the monster appeared and the lights blinking and the growls and the fire and the gunshots and the stench of blood and Nancy's hand against his. It felt like it had happened yesterday, and the biggest problem was that it had been five months since that and they still were holding onto it. They were not over it. It still hurt and stained and terrified them as much as it did five months ago.

"Bye Nancy", Will said, his face slightly grimmer than before.

"Goodbye, Nance", Jonathan said.

Nancy smiled even wider. "Bye Will. Bye Jonathan."

It wasn't until Jonathan got home that he realized, since when did he call her Nance?

4. May, 1984

Jonathan hated his work. It was endless and exhausting and managing to balance his work with getting good grades was getting nearly impossible. This time it was only worse. Time, as many have said, is relative. And it terrified Jonathan to think about the possibility that even though seconds seemed to drag on endlessly, time actually passed by so fast. It went by, on and on, without him even realizing, without him being able to *do* something about it. Finals were looming over him, like a threat, and he didn't have the time to do anything about it. He wondered for a moment if life would be like this forever, just a succession of time passing by too fast without him being able to stop it while at the same time each living second was too slow, too unbearable. He felt lost. At moments like these, the universe seemed like a place he didn't quite belong to, as if the load of life itself was just too much to deal with. The thought made him shiver.

When his shift was finally over, he drove home. Joyce had fallen asleep on the couch, her face keeping the expression of worry that didn't seem to leave her face ever since that November 6th. Jonathan stopped and stared at her for a moment, and thought of all the things she'd gone through, and he admired her so much, everything she managed to survive to, and yet she remained strong, unstoppable, being the best mother anyone could have ever asked for. He loved her, he loved her more than words could say. He sighed for a moment, a strange feeling taking over him, a kind of feeling that seemed too heavy, settling in his stomach and his chest and he was completely overcome by affection and by love.

The walk towards Will's bedroom, however, seemed to grow forever, unstoppable, infinite, but not the good type of infinite, as if the hallway drew longer and longer and darker and darker the more he walked. He knew it was an effect of the darkness of the house and of the pure, all-consuming fear he felt whenever he thought about the Upside Down. Jonathan knew he should be okay with seeing them resting peacefully, but the eerie silence around the house only made him think about darkness. He felt truly and completely *alone*. And the

thought of not being enough, of not doing enough, of not being able to help them scared him too much. His family was...his family was everything to him and the thought of losing them among the immensity of a universe he didn't know and he barely felt he belonged to, and the idea that that same universe they called 'home' could open up and swallow them whole and take everything with it, like a black hole, leaving him alone and hopeless and seeing how the forces of magnetic poles were also capable of creating paradoxes within themselves...well, that thought was simply unbearable. And it was always accompanied by the nagging, persistent feeling of absolute guilt.

And he felt it. He felt guilty for having had to work that night when the universe opened up and swallowed his little brother, when the parallel forces created a vacuum in time and space and Will fell in the middle of it, unable to run away. He felt guilty because he should have been there for Will, he should have picked him up, he should have been at his house, he should have saved him.

Two years ago, they'd built Castle Byers just so Will could feel safe. Amidst the pain and the loss and the bullies, Will had a place where he belonged, where they both belonged, a place where life seemed to be nothing but an abstraction of reality, a place where the universe seemed more like 'home' than like a threat in the midst of a world composed solely by the power and the realms of their own imagination, it seemed like it was the only place where they had some control of their lives.

"So, what now?", Will had asked him one day as he sat in Castle Byers, still feeling the effect of that cold they'd caught on as they built it.

"What do you mean?", Jonathan asked, a bit confused.

"I mean what are we going to do, now that dad's gone?"

Jonathan turned to look at him and his face had been covered by a slightly darker shade. He looked grim, and the sadness and fear behind his brother's eyes was so real that Jonathan felt he could reach out and feel it and touch it, and once he did he would understand what real pain and what real sadness felt like and he wanted it to stop, he wanted it all to stop. He sighed. "Now...we move on".

"But how?"

"By living", Jonathan said with a smile he hoped could convey the feeling of hope he wanted so desperately to feel.

"Living?", Will asked.

"Yes, living. It's all done. You won't hear the muffled yells anymore, you won't have to lock yourself inside your room to listen to The Clash as loud as you can while they fight, even though it's not enough to block the sounds coming from the outside and that place within your brain, you won't have to pretend to be someone you're not just to make him love you. You won't have to be afraid anymore, Will. We'll carry on, and we'll survive and we'll probably be happier and more at peace than we ever thought we could be. Mom will pull us through, as unstoppable as she's ever been. And so, now it's just time to live, Will. Without fear, without pretending, without fighting".

Will still looked a bit hesitant.

"Plus...if you ever get to feel sad or lonely or afraid, you'll always have The Clash and The Smiths and Bowie and Joy Division and Television, to make your life slightly more bearable".

"Much more bearable", Will replied.

Jonathan smiled. "And your box of crayons".

Will smiled back at him, his grin wide. "Yeah, that too".

"So, what do you want to draw now?"

"A Rainbow city".

"For your Rainbow ship?"

"Well, the ship had to come from somewhere, didn't it?"

Jonathan laughed. "Yes. Yes. It had to".

Will took out his crayons and as he leaned down and drew the silhouette of the buildings of the Rainbow city, Jonathan could only think that Will didn't look afraid anymore. And that expression? He would do anything he could to prevent that expression from ever glooming his little brother's face.

They'd spent days in there, in the middle of the pouring rain, muffled by the sounds of the hammer on the wood, as they built something that seemed shapeless and lifeless but somehow managed to look alive whenever they stepped a foot into it. He did all of that just so Will could be safe.

He would have done anything he could to prevent that expression from ever glooming his little brother's face, he'd thought.

He couldn't even find the right words to express that sense of dread that used to take over him during that week Will went missing. He used to spend hours seconds minutes fractions of seconds thinking about how it should have been the other way around, hours seconds minutes fractions of seconds in which Jonathan wondered if life was really worth the effort, if living *his* life was really worth the effort, and try as he might, most of the time the answer was no. He felt like a burden, and it was a feeling mixed with despair, with a raw need to be free, finally free, from the guilt and the pain and the loneliness. Free. In a universe he didn't belong to.

And then Nancy Wheeler flew into his life and he felt like he was just a little less of a burden.

And then Nancy Wheeler flew into his life and *saved* him. And somehow the magnetic poles rearranged themselves and restored the order of the universe...just a bit.

Nancy never ceased to amaze him. Jonathan had always tried to look through her. Somehow, he liked to believe, he would manage to find a way to peek into the depths of her soul, and so she would be less unpredictable, and so she would be less captivating, fascinating, brilliant, fantastic. And so he would finally be able to look at Nancy Wheeler and see her as nothing more than an ordinary person.

But it never happened. She was always ahead, she always managed to surprise him.

And she did. He remembered the way the pin left a mark on his thumb when Nancy approached him at school and told him how sorry she was about Will. She had been the only one to come and talk to him, not that it really mattered, he didn't expect much from the people at his school, but what she told him in particular was the most surprising bit: she told him that Will would be okay, because he was a strong kid.

Of course she knew that, Mike and Will had been best friends since they were four, but having her saying it with such conviction made Jonathan realize of all the things they'd shared without even realizing they had, and in that single second, as he stared at Nancy walking away and towards Steve Harrington, he wondered if he could call her a *friend*, if what they'd lived together was enough to label their relationship as such, and he concluded that no, it wasn't enough, and *yet* she was the closest thing he had to a friend besides Will and Joyce: she was the only person who talked to him, but also the only person he *wanted* to talk to.

And that, that was the most surprising bit.

He closed himself in his bedroom and without stopping to think about it for a second, he dialed the number to the Wheeler's.

It was 10 pm and he had probably lost his mind, but well, he was used to that already.

Karen answered, sounding a little distressed. "Hello?"

"Mrs. Wheeler? Hey, it's Jonathan."

Karen's voice turned even more concerned. "Jonathan. Is Will okay?"

No. "Yes. Listen. Could you please pass me on to Nancy?". *You have two fractions of second to come up with a good excuse. Do. It. Now.* "-I... I have a question about Chemistry and I know she's quite good at it."

Karen sighed in relief. "Oh. Yes, yes. You scared me for a second there."

"Sorry", Jonathan replied.

"I'll pass you on to her, then. Good night."

Seconds seemed to drag on and on and on and with each passing beat he questioned whether this was a good idea at all or not. Most of his senses yelled at him that No. It was Not A Good Idea. He ignored them. He heard the second she picked up the phone, he listened to her ragged breathing, as if she'd rushed to talk to him. He mentally kicked himself for being delusional. She finally talked. "Jonathan?"

This was Not A Good Idea.

He stood completely still at the phone for a few seconds, debating what he should do next. He felt like his whole body was frozen, like his brain simply could not produce any logical thought. He stood there, seconds passing by, Nancy simply waiting.

"Jonathan?", she asked once again, when she didn't get a reply. Her voice sounded deeper, as if she'd moved the phone closer to her, and he kept his eyes closed, imagining this little bubble, this little magnetic field that was enclosing them and surrounding them and abstracting them from reality, as if her voice was capable of building an imaginary Castle Byers by itself. He immediately felt better. "Are you okay?", she whispered.

He sighed.

They stood silent. All they could hear through the line was their breathing.

For an infinite amount of seconds, Jonathan felt he was not alone. There wasn't darkness and Will was safe.

"Hello?", Nancy sounded a bit exasperated now.

His body finally seemed to reconnect its neurotransmitters to the brain and he hung up the phone.

As soon as he did he collapsed against the pillow, feeling like a complete and utter idiot. Why did he always ended up making a fool out of himself in front of Nancy?

He closed his eyes and imagined the conversation they could have had.

"...do you need anything?", Nancy would finally ask.

"No", Jonathan would reply.

"...oookay", she'd say, sounding awkward, but she wouldn't hang up.

"Yes".

"Sorry, I'm just a little confused. Why did you call me?", it wouldn't sound like she was annoyed, it would come off as if she was genuinely curious.

"It's too quiet in here. I don't want to be alone with my own thoughts for too long." It scares me to think about my thoughts. It scares me what they're capable of. The dark and the silence scares me too.

"Are Will and Joyce okay?"

"Yes. They're sleeping, that's all. I just came back from work."

"Okay. What do you want me to do?", she would ask worriedly and seriously.

"Just- just talk to me. Tell me anything. Anything to distract me from myself. Please."

Nancy would remain silent for a moment, clearly pondering on what she should say. Eventually, she'd seem to make up her mind. She would tell him about her day, about the way she almost fell asleep as she listened to Mrs. Hickes' rendition of *Crime and Punishment*. Jonathan would reply by defending *Crime and Punishment* and Nancy would roll her eyes at him

and brush it off with a laugh. She would then tell him about the new record she bought and Jonathan would scoff at that, and then she'd go like 'but it's Michael Jackson!' And Jonathan would reply, 'but it's not David Bowie!' And they would laugh. And then the moment would be right for Nancy to share something she keeps a secret, something she'd only reveal to someone she trusted with her soul, and she would be hesitant at first, and then she'd sound certain and state clearly and simply that she had a nightmare the night before in which she dreamt her family had been dragged to the Upside Down and she woke up screaming and breathing heavily, on the verge of a panic attack. She would later ask him how he managed to deal with nightmares and he'd reply he didn't, that he just let them happen, and then he'd share a really secret nightmare, one of those he'd never tell Joyce or Will about.

And then this kind of looming silence would settle over them. But it wouldn't be the kind of desperate silence which brought Jonathan to call her in the first place, it would be a comfortable kind of silence, a silence in which they'd both feel like they belong somewhere, that they have someone to go to. And Jonathan would smile and feel, once again, the magic sensation of Nancy Wheeler saving him from himself.

Eventually Nancy would realize it's too late and they had class the next day. She'd laugh awkwardly, surprised at how fast the time had passed, because time is, after all, relative. He'd nod and she would say goodbye.

Jonathan would reply with the softest of voices, eagerly wishing he could get inside of Nancy's head and stop the influx of nightmares lurking in the dark, deep corners of her brain. He'd simply say, 'thank you', a thank you filled with all those things he knew he couldn't say out loud, but that he felt nonetheless.

Nancy would smile back. Her smile so soft and her voice so tender that Jonathan would know just from listening to her that there wouldn't be nightmares that night. "Goodnight, Jonathan. I'll always be here, whenever you're too afraid of being alone with your own thoughts."

Jonathan would only reply with a simple yet determined: "I'll always be here, Nancy."

He fell asleep over his bed, still holding the phone in his hand.

To say that he didn't want to go to school the next morning was an understatement. He didn't want to face Nancy, he didn't want her to ask questions, he didn't want her to look at him with pity, with embarrassment. He didn't want her to feel forced to talk to him because it was the right thing to do. He didn't want her to feel like she owed Jonathan something for what they'd lived during the days Will was missing.

He could have told his mom he was ill and simply skip, but he knew that the word 'ill' unsettled her and made her nervous and anxious. So no, he would face his fears and he would go to school and act as if nothing had happened and if Nancy felt forced to talk to him...well so be it. What else could he do about it?

She didn't.

As he walked through the crowded hallways, as he listened to the people's chatter in the background, endless, mindless chattering, as he simply walked, moving by sheer instinct rather than moved by his own brain, he found Nancy talking to Steve, which in this case was a very good thing because it would keep her distracted.

There was just one tiny problem.

They were standing three lockers away from Jonathan's locker.

And he had to take some books out of it.

As soon as he walked towards the locker, actively ignoring them, Nancy grew silent.

Jonathan could feel her eyes on him.

He sighed and closed his eyes. He knew Nancy was watching him.

He opened them again, took his books and closed the locker. He gathered a kind of courage he was 100% certain he wasn't feeling

and he risked a look at her.

And he was stunned. She had fixed her eyes on him. There were a thousand different expressions which the human face was capable of forming, aided by the eyebrows and the muscles around your mouth. Each and every single one of those expressions managed to transmit something for which words were not needed. Sometimes a smile said it all, or a face of anger and betrayal did, or a face of surprise.

After the mess he'd made last night, Jonathan could only imagine she would be looking at him either with pity, with shame or with embarrassment. Each and every one of those had a very clear facial expression he could easily recognize, for he'd faced them his whole life.

And what he saw in Nancy's face was none of that. No embarrassment, no pity, no shame. Nothing. What he saw, if he could somehow express it, was something like *worry*.

Yes. She looked worried *for* him, but she looked like there was something else there. Not just plain worry, but also a kind of wonder and a kind of curiosity and a sense of melancholy and Jonathan simply couldn't place in a single word whatever he saw when he stared at Nancy's face but he knew he saw a whole universe and a constellation of emotions playing right in front of his eyes and *God* he wanted to walk there and reach out and touch her, just touch her face, just softly run his fingertips along her cheeks and rub her eyebrows very very softly and very slowly until there were no more traces of that mix of emotions, until he could only see *peace* and *love* and *longing* in those eyes.

Oh no, he was deep down, wasn't he?

He blinked and yet those eyes were still staring at him and Jonathan was marveled at Nancy's ability to *speak* through her facial expressions, or at his very own ability at understanding what she wanted to say without words, because he could almost feel the words she was trying to transmit written inside his brain.

And so, he tried to put some order amidst the tangle and the mess that his brain had become, and he tried to gather his thoughts, and

he did his best to try and convey everything he wanted to tell her into one and only one facial expression that would manage to reassure her, and so he produced a smile, a small little one, but he knew his smile wasn't the one to do the talking, it was his eyes.

And he didn't know how he knew, but he *knew*, he knew she'd understood what he'd tried to say and so she smiled back, another small smile and that was the deepest conversation Jonathan had in his life without using a camera and how Nancy managed to bring out that in him was completely beyond him.

The bell rang and Steve and Nancy walked towards class, but Jonathan stood there, magnetized to that very spot, working through the tangle of his brain, as he tried to figure out once again the whole mystery of Nancy Wheeler.

5. Summer, 1984

Notes for the Chapter:

A slightly longer episode because we need to move the plot forward! Thank you so much for reading, for your lovely comments and kudos, they really, really make my day. Lots of love to you!

What's the weirdest part? Me or the bear trap?

You. It's definitely you.

He woke up with a start. He'd dreamed about her again. It had happened quite commonly lately, and it was as if his brain was reliving every single interaction they'd had and analyzed it and analyzed it again, trying to find a clue about it, about *them*. It didn't use to be like that, he didn't dream about her and he didn't think about her as usual as he was doing lately, and now he couldn't help but admit that the time he didn't spend thinking about Will and Joyce and caring about them and being worried about them...well, he was thinking about Nancy and how much he missed her and wondering over and over again if he'd actually understood the signals he'd seen between them or if he had just imagined it all... it did sound as something he would do. But... the way she'd smiled at him after she replied to the bear trap thing, the way they'd stared at one another before it all went to hell because of Steve's stupid friends and the disgusting and infamous 'the slut Wheeler' sign at the cinema... he'd thought for a second...maybe...but no.

No. It was dangerous threading through that path. It was a treacherous path that promised nothing but heartbreak and loneliness in return and he was so afraid, so afraid of opening himself, of opening his feelings, of admitting that he actually felt *something* for her, whatever what was.

But that one time when she hugged him after he pulled her out of the upside down, he could feel her warmth, her scent, and despite the

situation, or maybe because of it, he didn't want to let her go, he didn't, and he was actually relieved when she looked at him for a while, silently, and after a while, she simply asked him if he could come with her to her house, and he saw the fear in her eyes but there was... something else... something. And they didn't talk the whole way back to her house and yet it was a comforting silence because they were *alright*. And then as he laid back and stared at her, so close, so warm, it was what they both needed, even though they were just friends or...whatever they were at that exact moment -more like acquaintances-, they both found comfort in each other and he missed that so much, he truly did.

He rubbed his eyes and looked at the clock next to the bed. It was early, too early to stand up and go to class. It was his last day of the school year. So was Will's, after all everyone heard about his case -or what the government had authorized to be heard about the case- and even though he missed over a month of class while his health improved, teachers were understanding and he got good grades. Until recently. They were dropping. Not dramatically, but for someone as smart as Will, well, it was a downfall. It worried Jonathan to no end, but it was just another one of those topics they simply didn't talk about. There was a very, very long list of topics they didn't talk about, and it was constantly growing and growing.

Like, for example, they hadn't talked much about Bob. Joyce and him had been dating for about two months and he was a good guy, but he didn't know what Will thought of him. He approached the topic once but Will dismissed it, saying it was fine, yet there was a kind of shadow over his face that plainly told Jonathan what Will wasn't saying upfront: *but he isn't dad*. And Jonathan could tell that Will still missed Lonnie, every once and then.

There was a long list of things he didn't talk about with Joyce either. Will's wellbeing was one of them. He knew the basics, he knew when Will told her that he'd had a nightmare or something, but he didn't know the details, and he could tell that Joyce didn't want to tell him because she didn't want to worry him, but all this situation was worrying him, was worrying him deeply and he wished Will could just trust him again, he didn't know, couldn't understand what he had done wrong.

And there it was again, the never-ending constellation of thoughts drawing themselves within his brain, unable to stop them, it started with him thinking about Nancy and it led to Will and then to Joyce and then anxiousness and that constant feeling of guilt crushing him in and his thoughts spiraling downwards, and they never stopped. He sighed. It was far too early to get ready to go to school, but he wouldn't get any sleep anymore. He stood up and went to make breakfast for Will and Joyce, it was the least he could do.

He talked to Nancy later that day. Classes were over in what had certainly been his worst school year -both psychologically and grades-wise- and he'd felt relieved when he heard the bell ring. It was *over*, no more seeing people's faces staring at him, talking behind his back, calling him 'the freak', or referencing to him as the brother of 'the one that was abducted by aliens', a theory that had taken a lot of strength lately in town when it came to Will, and one that Jonathan couldn't even outright deny, because well, he had no freaking idea of what a Demogorgon was.

So immersed was he in his own thoughts that he didn't even hear the footsteps of Nancy approaching, all he heard was the "hey!". He looked up, blinked and turn to look at her.

God, she was so beautiful.

"Hey!", he said with a smile, because she was smiling too, not in a *I-feel-forced-to-talk-to-you* kind of way but more in a *it's-been-so-long-let-me-know-you're-okay* way. And he loved it.

She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear and cleared her throat. "So- um...any plans for the summer?"

"Yes, lots actually!"

"Oh really?", she said, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, you know, working on a double shift and getting home and

falling asleep over the couch”, he said good-naturedly.

She chuckled. “Sounds like quite the plan”, she said, keeping the smile in her face.

“It is. I hate to admit it, but it’s the wild life I lead”, he said, jokingly. He didn’t understand why, but every time he thought about talking to her, in his mind it sounded as if it would be awkward and difficult and filled with uncomfortable silences that he felt the need to fill in as soon as possible, no matter what stupid thing crossed his mind, and yet he found out over and over again that it was so *easy*... once it happened, once they talked, it all worked out, it just flowed by, it just worked. Despite the way his heart rushed, and his cheeks blushed almost immediately. Yeah, except that, it worked.

She laughed, this time out loud. “Ha! Quite the daredevil, aren’t we?”

“Always”.

They both laughed.

He cleared his throat. “No but seriously, those are my plans for the summer. What about you?”

She looked down, hesitantly, and shook her head. “No, don’t have any. I don’t feel quite- you know?”

He did. He nodded. “You feel like you don’t deserve it.”

She looked up and found his eyes studying her deeply and when their eyes met, they both *knew*. They knew the other understood. “Yeah”, she said, unable to hide her surprise. “Yeah, that’s exactly how it feels like. Exactly”.

“I know. I feel the same. Who am I to have fun when my brother went through what he went through? When he is still suffering?”

She frowned. “He is?”, she asked.

Damn it. Wasn’t supposed to say that. He sighed and moved his head

up and down, slowly, quite slowly. “He doesn’t say anything, but- I can tell. I know”.

She stared at him and he saw a bit of worry drawn in her expression. He wished he could kiss it away.

“I’m sorry Jonathan”, she said.

He shook his head. “No, no, don’t be. He’ll be okay. We both will. I promised him we would, and I’m not breaking that promise, not ever”, *not ever again*, he didn’t say.

Nancy smiled, a small smile. “I know you won’t”, and she said it in such a low and intimate voice that it felt as if they were sharing something incredibly private, something they only dared to share with one another if no one else, and it felt comforting. She and her beautiful way of making him comfortable, of making him safe and well and alive and immortal.

They simply stared at one another. Her blue and bright eyes fixed on him, studying him, not walking away, not calling him a freak, not breaking apart from him, just... *there*, smiling and laughing and joking and confiding in him and...her smile. Her smile must be the place. The place he felt comfortable and safe and *himself* at.

And there it was again, the pull of the magnetic poles and he didn’t want to run away, if anything he wanted to merge with them and melt within them and unlike poles attract, don’t they?

She smiled.

It certainly must be the place.

“Well, at least you’ll allow yourself to live a very, *very* wild life this summer”, Nancy said.

He cracked laughing. “Yeah well, the roof might break apart at any moment and a Demogorgon might fall from there, we better live while we can”.

She laughed. “God! When you put it *that* way!”. It felt...cathartic somehow, talking about it in this way, as if it was something that couldn’t hurt them, as if it wasn’t anything real, any real threat, as if it was all a metaphor, a literary figure, an invention. He liked thinking about it in that way, he really did.

They laughed really loud and the few people who were still around the hallway, but rapidly leaving it, desperate to get out of school as fast as they could, turned to look at them, she moved closer to him and squeezed his arm. “Shh!!!, they’ll hear us. They’ll think we’re crazy!”

“Nancy, we saw a Demogorgon crawling out of a wall, maybe we are”, he said.

She stared at him softly, the smile still fixed in place. “Yeah, maybe. Well, at least we *both* are”.

“Yeah. Could be worse.”

“Could it?”

He shrugged. “I suppose, I don’t know”.

They looked at each other with uncertainty. And then the conversation was naturally over, as good conversations are meant to be.

She stared at him for another while and looked slightly hesitant herself, unlike how she’d looked the whole time they’d talked. She took two steps back, as if she was about to walk away, before walking towards him in a rush and hugging him.

She was hugging him. Nancy was *hugging him*. He couldn’t help the yelp of surprise. Her arms around him, so soft, so warm, so perfect, he could feel the soft touch of their skins, her hand around his neck, holding onto him. He stood speechless for a moment, shocked, unable to do anything as his brain tried desperately to wake itself from the meltdown it had just gone through. As soon as it did, Jonathan reacted and it had to be fast, because it could be over in any second,

and so he held her back, his arms around her, holding onto her as tight as he could and amidst the chaos of the upside down and this world and in a place where poles repelled and attracted and a single black hole could swallow them and their universe whole, they belonged *somewhere*, or at least he did. He did.

“Have a good summer, Jonathan”, she whispered against his chest. So warm, so soft.

“So to you, Nancy”.

“I feel like it’s been ages since I last laughed”, she admitted with another whisper.

He thought back to it for a second and wondered himself when it had been the last time he’d laughed. He was certain it had been with Will, but he couldn’t remember when it had been, it felt somehow... blurry, as if the fear and fright and the anxiety were swallowing those positive emotions, like some kind of black holes within his brain, deleting and absorbing and killing and annihilating them all, all what was bright and good. “Yeah, me too”, he admitted to her and only her.

He could feel the soft touch of her hair against his cheek. He gathered all the strength that he could manage to, he tried to block the pull of the black holes in his brain and went for it, and he kissed her cheek. Softly, quickly, a kiss very much like the one she’d given him last Christmas. And then, feeling terribly embarrassed, he pulled away. And he found her face once again, and he didn’t see disgust or regret in her face, no, he saw a small smile, a smile she seemed to try to be suppressing, as she looked down, and well, if her cheeks reddened just a bit, well, then it probably was because it was almost sunset and the sun cast a light on her face.

He looked at her and smiled too, a smile he tried to suppress as well, and then he looked down, and if his cheeks reddened just a bit, well, then it probably was because it was almost sunset and the sun cast a light on his face, he supposed.

She was about to say something when they heard the honk of a car.

Nancy immediately blinked and took a couple of steps back. “Oh”, she said.

He frowned.

“That’s Steve. He left early but said he’d come and pick me up”.

Oh, and there it was. The conversation had just turned awkward.

Jonathan nodded, “okay”.

She smiled, albeit a bit forcedly, and nodded back. “So I’ll get going, see you later, Jonathan”, she said, fixing the strap of her bag and running out of the hallway and into the exit.

Jonathan sighed. “Yes. See you”, he replied. It was funny, it was as if the pads of his fingers still carried a kind of tingling he’d only felt as he was hugging her back, as if they were trying to remind him of what it had felt like to hold her in his arms, and he committed that feeling to memory, for he would never allow the black holes to swallow that feeling too, not at all.

He smiled and walked away.

Jonathan had dreamed of New York again. He hadn't visited it, but he had seen it on tv many times. Ever since he was a little boy, he'd told Joyce over and over that he would go to NYU. To study what? He still didn't know. He guessed something to do with art or photography, the two things he liked the most in all the world.

What was the point now anyway? The closer he got to graduation (although he still had two more years), the more impossible and distant the dream seemed. He had to keep his feet on the ground and know that it wasn't going to happen. His family couldn't afford it and even if his grades or his talent got him somewhere, he simply couldn't leave Will alone.

A sense of longing took over him. Society reminds us over and over

again how we have to work to achieve our goals and work and work *harder* and hey! If you work hard after ten years maybe you'll have enough money to have your own car and enough money to buy a house in the suburbs and then your dreams will come true and work hard so one day you can be a father and you can have a family and be a proper representative of the middle class, a proper American man. How did that Talking Heads song went? *Letting the days go by, letting the water hold me down...* That was certainly how he was feeling right now.

Well, all of that was, as Nancy would so eloquently say, a bunch of *bullshit*. This dream had been so vivid that he felt he simply couldn't wait, he simply couldn't be patient, he simply couldn't work just so he could be like everyone else. He wanted to go further, he didn't want a house in the suburbs and three kids and a car and a nice job at an office, he wanted to fade into the lights and the movement and the *passion* and the art of the city and he wanted to capture its vibe, its every waking movement.

If Jonathan believed in fate, he would even dare to say that New York City was his North.

But he lived in Hawkins, and in Hawkins the North was lost amidst the energy and the radioactivity of a certain place which was designed only with the mere purpose of ruining everyone's lives under the intention of fighting the Coms.

And so the compass changed its connection to the magnetic pole of the earth. And so, the magnetic field which surrounded him and surrounded Will and surrounded Joyce and surrounded Nancy was nothing but a weak, vulnerable, volatile and constantly changing variable.

No point fighting for your dreams in Hawkins. Because Hawkins would remind you, over and over again, that this wasn't a battle for you to win. In a place like Hawkins you weren't raised so you could follow your dreams, you were raised so you could turn into a proper American man, and those who weren't, well, they could be picked to be lab rats, they could be eliminated, or they could be turned into weapons against the soviets. Such was the very logic of Hawkins.

And he had to protect his family, first and foremost. Even if that meant losing the ever-changeable north, even if it meant ignoring the scope of weak magnetic field surrounding him and Nancy Wheeler, even if it meant losing and sacrificing everything else. He had to make sure his brother would be okay. He had to help his mother not lose her mind.

And somehow, he had to find his very own peace of mind along the way.

Summer was a bit of a burden. In far too many ways. Will was barely at home because he usually hung out with his friends but his mom simply couldn't be calm whenever Will wasn't at home and she worked too and the evenings were boring and he had to work a lot and he worried all the time because what if Will needed him and he wasn't home for him? He'd already messed up once, he would never, ever allow himself to mess it up again.

A much-familiar voice talked to him inside his mind. *It's all your fault.*

Oh yeah, that was another reason why summer was a burden.

Whenever he was at school he had things to do and so he could keep his mind focused on something, *anything* that could drive those thoughts away, but when summer came and he had nothing to do and days were long and he was alone at home or at his dull work, and he was invaded by that feeling of uneasiness, well in those moments he felt he could lose his mind.

So one of the highlights of his summer days was when he got to pick Will up at the Wheelers and he made sure that his brother was okay and that everything would -eventually- be okay.

Sometimes Will got frustrated because he wasn't allowed to go anywhere outside of the door of that house and the other guys went riding on their bicycles or something. Those days he barely talked to

Jonathan. Those days were difficult.

Sometimes Jonathan ran directly into Nancy and Steve at the Wheelers. He couldn't do anything but nod politely at them and walk away as fast as possible. Sometimes he could feel Nancy's eyes on him but he never turned, never said anything else to her. Why would he either way? Those days were difficult.

Sometimes Will had a coughing fit and Joyce would get really worried and call Hopper immediately and they would take Will to the hospital but always order Jonathan to stay at home so he could make sure that no one else would break into their house to bug them or to gather some evidence or something of the sorts. Jonathan sat amidst the darkness and the worry and the uncertainty until he could see the lights of the car as it parked outside and Will would always look much better but he never looked quite like he used to *before* and oh god, those days were the most difficult.

And so summer went by in an unstable whirl. It was like some kind of limbo, like a purgatory, like a *not-quite-here* but *not-quite-there* kind of experience, always playing in the in-between, always wondering when the next attack would come, when the wall would swing open and swallow them whole.

And the heat would not help and the silence would not help and the *loneliness* would never help.

He thought about Nancy almost every day. He was worried about her. He didn't know why, couldn't tell why, but there was this particular feature about her that allowed Jonathan to somehow *understand* her and know what went through her mind. And he saw it, he saw it in her eyes, whenever their gazes met at her house, whenever she turned back to stare at him, whenever she said 'hello', she was not okay, she was not the same. The hug seemed...so distant at those moments.

He knew the whole situation was breaking her inside, he knew it hurt her, he didn't know what to do to help her, he didn't know how to talk to her, how to comfort her. He could almost see the guilt written in her eyes, as if every single breath she took was a painful reminder

of what had happened to Barb, of what she thought she'd done to Barb.

One day, he was sitting in the living room of the Wheelers as he waited while Will gathered all his things after one particularly long session of Dungeons and Dragons when the front door opened and Nancy came in running and climbed up the stairs. She didn't even realize he was there.

Steve came after her a few seconds later, yelling "Nancy!"

Jonathan frowned and stood up, climbing the stairs a moment after Steve and stopping halfway through.

"Nancy, open the door" -said Steve-, "please".

No reply.

"Nancy?", a knock, "Nancy!", another knock. "Hey, open the door, please!", Steve kept saying.

A minute later, Nancy opened it just a little bit, her eyes were glistening with tears. "How can you do it?", she asked him silently, her voice shaky.

"What do you mean?"

"How can you sit in front of them and pretend like it's all fine and like, like-", she swallowed, "like we didn't kill their daughter."

"Nance-", Steve started.

"How can you manage to listen to the stories that remind you that Barb was a real, whole person, a living, breathing human being, while knowing that you and I both took apart every scrape of life she had and turned her into a not living, not breathing, not a human being?"

They stood silent for a moment.

"How can you do it?, because I can't, Steve. I can't do this anymore."

She sounded defeated and hurt. Jonathan had to look away, because he felt as if her words and her tone and her tears opened a wound inside his own chest, as if he could feel her own pain.

"Nance, lower your voice", Steve told her.

"FUCK YOU!", Nancy replied.

"Hey!", Steve said, walking towards her and wrapping his arms around her. "Hey", he said more calmly.

She cried into his chest, just like she'd done the day Barb's parents had been to their school. She sobbed and sobbed, and he held her, and Jonathan sighed, because he wished he knew how to heal all of it, how to make her feel better, but he knew that the guilt would never go away, ever.

He knew it because it had been seven months and he still felt the same guilt he felt at the exact moment when Joyce was about to leave for work and asked for Will and he didn't know where Will was and she said, "I can't believe you!" and his brother was gone and he couldn't believe himself and it was all his fault and it still hurt, it was like a healing wound that would always tear itself open and hurt him and make him feel dead inside but still he *felt* something, which was a reminder that he was in fact a living breathing human being whereas Barb was not any longer and his brother could have met the same fate and suddenly everything was not okay and Nancy was still crying against Steve's chest and he found it hard to breathe and there were tears about to fall from his eyes but not here, not now, he had to stitch the wound and pull himself back together and Steve and Nancy walked inside her bedroom and closed the door and Jonathan simply stood there, in the middle of the staircases, desperately trying to gather the pieces of himself that seemed to be scattered all around the floor and-

"What are you doing here?", a voice behind him said.

He jumped and when he turned, he found his brother, who was

staring at him curiously.

He dragged a deep breath and closed his eyes for a single second. "Nothing", he replied.

Will looked towards Nancy's room and then back to Jonathan but didn't say anything, then he fixed his eyes on Jonathan, his eyebrows furrowing. "Are you okay?", he asked.

"Yes, of course I am", his eyes turned involuntarily towards the closed door of Nancy's room.

The smell of your pillow and the warmth of knowing you were there and that somehow we were not alone and the monsters couldn't get us there because we were invincible and you were so strong and so brilliant and you and you and you-

"Hm", Will said, not quite believing him.

"How was the game?"

Will shrugged, "we didn't get to finish it, but we were so exhausted that we didn't care anymore".

Jonathan turned his back to the door and began to walk down the stairs, but Will stopped, looking a bit hesitant. Jonathan stopped and turned to look at him. "Hey, what's wrong?"

Will cleared his throat. "Erm- well, the guys have been talking about going to this new arcade, and I'd like that, you know?, I mean, I know I can't leave Mike's house but- I just, I want to go there. Please."

No. Please. Don't ask me that.

"We'll talk about it in the car, let's go."

When they got inside the car, Will already looked a bit angry. "You're going to say no, aren't you?"

Jonathan sighed. "I'm only going to say that you need to talk to mom

first. Listen Will, we're just worried that this thing that took you-

"I know that okay! But- I just, I want things to go back to how they used to be. I can't imagine living the rest of my life like this, Jonathan! I know it isn't easy but, it has to happen eventually".

"I know", Jonathan replied with a sigh. "We just don't want it to happen yet",

"I feel like I'm wasting all this time, Jonathan, and it terrifies me to think about the possibility of being swallowed by the upside down, but I can't allow that fear to take over my life".

"We don't want that either, Will. It's just- we just want you to be okay. We don't want to see you hurting ever, ever again, it's the worst thing we've ever had to witness, do you hear me?, when mom called me to tell me they had taken you to the hospital, and I got there and I saw your face, it looked so drained of life and for a moment I felt I was about to faint because I couldn't imagine a world without you in it, and then you *breathed* and you were okay, and you were going to live, and yet, when I look back to it, I can only remember the exact feeling I had as I saw your face for the first time, and it was absolutely terrifying, please Will, we don't want to go through that again".

Will stood speechless and went quiet for a while.

And then a coughing fit started and it all went blurry and he couldn't get to their house any faster and the conversation was over.

Eventually, Joyce agreed to let Will go to the arcade.

And the thought was terrifying, but Will was right, he had to carry on and live his life, and go back to being the extraordinary boy he was, and that wouldn't be possible if he moved from their house towards Mike's and from there to their house. It just wouldn't do.

Still, he felt worried, and he felt this was going to be a long summer.

He wasn't wrong.

Notes for the Chapter:

The Talking Heads song Jonathan is referring to is 'Once In A Lifetime', you can listen to it [here!](#)

6. September, 1984

Notes for the Chapter:

I'm so sorry for taking sooooo long to update! Life has been hectic these last couple of months, but I'm back. Hope you like this chapter! Thank you so much for your kudos and your comments, they always make my day. Lots of love to you! <3

Classes had started again. With a ragged beep of the alarm, with a sigh, with a pair of old converse, classes had started again. It had almost been a year since Will's disappearance and it all seemed to be falling back into place again. Except nothing was.

And he knew he should be feeling better, he knew he should feel grateful for having had Will back, he should be fine, but he wasn't and, to be honest, nothing at all was.

It all felt...odd, Jonathan felt as if he subconsciously knew that it wasn't over, it simply wasn't, and he felt as if he was getting ready to go into the battle. But which battle? He couldn't tell. It was gone, wasn't it? The thing that had almost claimed Will's life, the thing that almost took his own life and threatened to tear his world apart, it was gone.

Was it?

It had to be. It just had to.

But the coughing fits and the lights blinking and this *darkness* looming over the town that no one else managed to see but that was there either way in every single one of his photographs told him that it wasn't gone and that it seemed uncertain if it would ever be. Maybe they'd just have to get used to it, live with it, with the nagging feeling, with the constant fear that Will would vanish from their hands once again and this time they wouldn't be able to find him again. Somehow it sounded better to go into battle and die immediately than slowly burn out. It did sound better, didn't it?

The bell rang.

Jonathan blinked. It felt as those dreams in which your soul leaves your body, it felt as if his brain had just left his body somehow, as if he'd abstracted himself from every instance of reality, locked up in the walls of his own brain and the ring of the bell had brought him back.

He looked around. Classroom. English class was over. He had absolutely no idea what the teacher had been talking about for the last hour. In a moment he was listening to Mr. Greene's explanation about how Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* -a personal favorite for Jonathan and their assigned reading for this term- redefined the notion of journalism and the next moment he was locked in a universe filled with monsters and darkness.

"Jonathan?", a voice behind him said.

A voice which was the antonym of darkness and cold. And yet a voice he could only relate to that moment in which there was nothing but darkness and cold.

"Hey", he said, trying to add some kind of light into the turmoil inside his mind.

He turned. He didn't know Nancy was in that class. It had been their first English class of the year and he'd been immersed in his thoughts ever since the beginning. He supposed that was even better.

Nancy.

He hadn't seen her since that time she locked herself in her room. After that Will used to spend most of his time with the kids at the arcade so he stopped going to Mike's house and therefore stopped seeing Nancy at all. Which was okay. He had to admit he felt a bit like he was a burden for her, like an added problem.

But she was talking to him right then. She had chosen to talk to him, she could have not, but she did.

Nancy- with her hair shorter and slightly lighter, Nancy looking beautiful and perfect and flawless and Nancy being strong and wonderful and amazing and just in that moment Jonathan realized how much he *had* missed her, missed her in a way that was not really comparable to an emotion, but more like a feeling of being hollow, without understanding why.

Well, he understood why now.

"Hey!", he said, unable to hide his surprise at her new look.

"Hey", she said with a smile but with a small frown.

"It's em- good, the, what, what you did to your hair- I...", he sighed, "I like it".

There, he'd said it. Had he? it had seemed like he had just stuttered the whole thing. Oh god, he was so embarrassing around her. He really had to put himself together when he talked to her.

She smiled wider as she ran a hand through her hair unconsciously, "yeah, I wanted a bit of a change for this new year", and then her smile vanished, as she looked aside, as if her brain was locked up in a distant memory, as if she had never left the forest in the Upside Down.

That was when Jonathan realized that she wasn't actually happy. She wasn't okay at all. And it all made sense: the hair, the attitude, the desire to start anew, to leave the past behind, but the past was running to catch them, and its pace was faster than time itself, unstoppable, unreachable, unforgettable.

She fixed her eyes on him and leaned a bit closer as she whispered, "are you okay?"

I should be asking you that and I want to but I don't want to because I know there's nothing I can do to make it better.

He sighed. "Yeah. Fine. I'm fine". He'd rehearsed that answer for ten months, he was more than used to it.

"How was the rest of your summer?", she asked, tucking a strand of her hair behind her ear.

"It was good-", *lie*, "been very busy, lots of things to do", *a bigger lie*.

She stared at him, the frown still drawn in her face. She didn't say anything else.

"Yeah- everything's fine. Listen- I've got to go but I guess I'll see you in this class?", he said, feeling the need to leave the classroom as fast as he could.

She sighed silently. "Yeah, I guess you will". She didn't sound happy. Oh no, was she thinking about switching classes or something? Was she disappointed of being placed in this class with him?

"Um- yes. I'll see you later".

"Kay", she replied.

Just as he was leaving the classroom, her voice stopped him again. "Say hello to Will from me, I-", a sigh, "I hope he's better".

"He is. Bye."

He walked out as fast as he could, closing his eyes with a sigh. Why was he being such an asshole around her?

They'd interacted just a couple of times before Will and Barb's disappearance. He'd always felt attracted to her, always. But as they talked and got to know each other better, Jonathan realized of something he'd only seen in movies: as he started to know her, he slowly felt as he grew attached to her. And it was deep, deeper than he'd ever thought it could possibly be.

Oh god, he'd fallen in love with Nancy Wheeler.

And he hadn't just fallen in love with her, he'd grown attached to her, developed feelings for her, he desperately wanted to know everything about her, wanted to solve every single piece of the puzzle, of the labyrinth, of the mystery, he wanted to kiss her and hold her, he wanted to help her through her pain, he wanted to tell her he understood, he wanted to be with her, spend as much time with her as possible, he wanted her to be happy, he wanted to stop seeing that uncertainty that flashed before her eyes whenever no one else was looking. And they'd both lived the same, they both *knew* what few others could even begin to understand, and that, more than anything else, would keep them tied for the rest of their lives, by that goddamned pull of the magnetic forces.

He leaned his forehead against his locker. He wanted to scream with rage. How had he allowed this to happen?

It wasn't supposed to happen. It was never meant to happen.

And -he told himself for the twentieth time in the last months- she was with Steve. She loved Steve. And he'd have to make peace with it. There was no other way. They were happy and he had to be okay with it.

But being so close to her didn't help at all. Her smile and her hair and this kind of honesty that loomed around her, it was pulling him in, and he didn't have the will to say no, so the only answer was to stay away from her, pretend like nothing had happened last year, like they were never friends, like she didn't save him, like he didn't save her, like they don't have a matching scar, a constant reminder of that time they both saw hell break loose and came back alive, like they didn't stare at each other as they bandaged each other hands, like he wasn't about to pour all his feelings for her out there in the open, like she didn't want him to do it, like she didn't caress her hand in the softest way, in a way that Jonathan still felt every now and then, like the shadow of her touch. How on Earth could he ever pretend none of that ever happened?

He had no idea at all.

But so far it had worked.

So he'd just have to continue... avoiding her, he supposed. It was the best thing for both of them.

And he'd have to get used to that hollow feeling he had whenever he saw her cry, and to actually feel his heart breaking every time she looked towards Barb's chair with a sigh, and to feel his heart breaking as he tried to reach out to her but got stopped by this invisible barrier that seemed to be the same limit between the real world and the Upside Down but to Jonathan it only divided them and reminded them that it was never meant to be.

Jesus, this was going to be a long year, wasn't it?

He'd gotten a couple of days off work so he went home early.

He arrived to find Joyce sitting in the couch, staring into the horizon, smoking a cigarette, without moving at all, as if she was lost in her own mind.

"Mom?", he asked, confused.

She jumped in surprise, as if she hadn't even heard the click of the door. As soon as she turned to look at him, she rushed to put the cigarette off. "Hi!", she said animatedly, even though she looked anything but.

"Why are you here?", Jonathan asked as he walked towards her and sat next to her on the couch.

She ran a hand through her face. "I-", she stuttered, "I...erm I thought we had an appointment at the clinic today and requested a day off, as soon as I got to school to find Will he told me that was the next week and-", she laughed a humorless laugh, "and that he had AV club, so-", she shrugged and turned to look at him. "I came back here".

Jonathan sighed. "Do you want me to pick him up at four?"

"No, no", Joyce said, shaking her head. "No, it's fine. I'll get him. You go and get ready for work".

"I don't have to work today mom, I told you this morning-remember?"

Joyce squeezed her eyes shut. "Right!, right, I'd forgotten- what's wrong with me?"

"Nothing is wrong. You just have lots of things in your mind right now. You need a break".

"I don't want a break, Jonathan. I can't allow myself to have a break", she said seriously, looking a bit exasperated.

She sighed and they both fell silent. The weight of unsaid words looming in the space between them, spreading all over the living room, passing by that small black spot in the wall, the only physical remainder of what had happened ten months ago, at the place where Will had talked to them through lights. He felt the weight of the silence, which grew louder and louder and louder and-

"Hey", Joyce took him out of his stupor, as she to fix her eyes on him. "We haven't talked for a while".

"We talked this morning, when I told you about work."

"Yes but- but that doesn't count. I just", she looked angry and frustrated, a feeling that seemed to be always residing within herself, waiting for a small spark to be ignited, to go back to surface. "Jesus, I don't know what's going on in your life, Jonathan I'm so sorry", she rubbed her face with her hands.

Jonathan shook his head. "No, no, it's okay mom, you aren't missing anything anyway. I understand, there are lots of things in your mind".

"It's just-"

"I know."

She looked down, and for a second there was a hint of exhaustion behind her features. "It becomes too much sometimes", she said so simply, as if it wasn't one of the most important things she'd ever told Jonathan, as if she wasn't admitting something she had kept hidden ever since Will's disappearance, something she never dared to say aloud.

"I know. It becomes too much for me too", was all he could reply.

"He isn't okay, Jonathan".

Jonathan couldn't help the need to flex the fingers of his right hand. It was a custom he'd adopted recently, whenever he remembered that week, his fingers moved subconsciously to touch the scar of the cut in his palm, like some kind of PTSD or something. He hated it. It reminded him of Nancy. It kind of made him feel better, or at least it gave him some comfort, some sense of relief. He hated it.

"No mom, he's not."

"I don't know what to do."

"Neither do I, mom", he sighed. He might as well just go on, "he- he wouldn't talk to me. I want him to trust in me, I want him to tell me how he feels, what he's seen, what he's thinking about, but it's like ever since- that moment, he became like a closed book, like the day he vanished all the things we'd built up until then, they vanished too".

She shook her head. "He doesn't want to worry you, Jonathan".

"But not knowing anything worries me more!", he said looking at her, feeling completely helpless and oh so angry, he wanted to punch a wall or something. "I just- I just, I want everything to go back to how it used to be, mom". He sighed and closed his eyes, keeping his head down. And oh god, he hadn't realized how much he needed to say it, how much he needed to confide it to someone. This conversation was long overdue.

She placed a hand on his back. "I know love, I know".

"I'm exhausted", was all he managed to say, helpless, quiet. He barely allowed himself to feel defeated, but in that dim living room that held the remembrances of it all, he felt it all over his body: he was exhausted and he was defeated and he was so tired, he just wanted it all to stop for a moment, he just needed some time to breathe.

"I know that too", she whispered.

"Are you okay?"

"Me? of course I'm fine. As long as you two are fine. I'm wonderful", she said, looking at him with a small smile and there she was again, pulling off strength from nowhere to be the best mom they could possibly ever ask for.

He replied with the same small smile. A smile filled with nostalgia and pain, raw and open pain, but also tainted with a bit of hope, "I will pick him up, okay? You go get some rest."

"Okay."

She sat up straight and cleared her throat, just before Jonathan had the chance to stand up and leave. "Listen. I know we haven't gotten the chance to talk about this but, are you fine with Bob? What do you think about him?"

Oh. Right. Bob.

He couldn't help but sigh.

He didn't *dislike* Bob per se, not really. He was smart and good and he cared about him and Will and he really worked hard in order to gain their approval and ever since they started dating his mom looked...a little bit less unhappy, and so he liked that, but at the same time he didn't want Bob to get in the middle of their family, because it was *theirs*, it was completely and entirely theirs and it belonged to them and only them and he hated thinking about those things because he sounded like such a selfish and heartless bastard but he felt so protective of his family that he simply could not see it ever changing,

ever being something different than *this* because this was good, and maybe as time passed he would make peace with it but now he couldn't help but see Bob as an intruder, a likable intruder.

But an intruder nonetheless.

It wasn't that there was something wrong with him. There was simply something wrong in Jonathan.

He swallowed. "I, if you're happy with him then I'm happy you're happy but-"

"But?"

"But *please* don't try to force us to accept him as a father figure, because I had enough of make pretend father figures", he said, being brutally honest, and kind of hating himself for it but feeling relieved because of it.

She looked aside. "I see". They stood silent for a moment. "I- don't want that for you either, I just- he makes me happy and", she shrugged, "that's it".

"Then it's fine mom, it's good. He is a nice man. I'm glad you're together", he said with a smile and a shrug.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Of course. You deserve all the happiness in this world", he replied, covering her hand with his.

She squeezed his hand and pulled him in for a hug. "You're a wonderful son, Jonathan".

Jonathan choked a little bit on what she told him because that was a bit rare coming from her, he couldn't help but hug her back. "Thank you mom".

As soon as they pulled apart, she looked at him with a cheeky grin on her face. "Now, now-", she said playfully, "may I ask you what's going

on in that heart of yours?"

"Mom, no", Jonathan said laughing.

"Oh come on", she said, tickling him. "We never talk about these things!"

"Yeah. There's a reason why we don't".

"Come on!", she said, "what about Nancy?"

He stood still.

She raised an eyebrow.

He dragged a deep breath and fixed his eyes somewhere -anywhere- but on his mom. "What about her?", he said shakily, forcing his brain to react, to respond.

"Jonathan, I'm not stupid. I can tell."

"You can tell *what?*", he replied with a shrug.

"The way you look at her... and all the time you spent together-", she said.

"There's- that's- no. No, I mean, erm, we're friends. Sort of. Not really. Just- we kind of talk to each other every now and then, that's it. We just have this horrible and traumatic experience in common, and that is all."

"Is she still dating the Harrington guy?"

He sighed. "Yeah".

"Oh", she said, realization hitting her. "I see", her face falling a bit.

"But I do *not* have feelings for her", Jonathan replied, defensively. "I really don't".

"Sure. Too bad your mother knows you better than anyone and can read through all your lies", she said with a smile as she pulled him in for another hug. "You'd make a nice couple though, you know?", she whispered in his ear and he couldn't help but smile.

"Mom! Stop it!", he said as he pulled apart.

"Only telling the truth", she replied with a smirk. "Unlike you".

"Yeah well nothing is going to happen", he said as he stood up. "Now, I've got to go. Will's club is over in fifteen minutes".

She nodded. "Thank you".

"Anytime, mom. And I mean it. You're not alone. You're not".

"I'm the one who's supposed to tell you that".

"Well you need the reminder every now and then", he said as he smiled at her. "Get some rest".

"I will."

7. October, 1984

Notes for the Chapter:

And so we start to dwell into s2 canon! From now on, each chapter won't be monthly but based on each episode of the season. Thank you so much for reading and for your comments, enjoy! x

Will was not okay. He knew it. He could tell. There was something in his eyes in his face in his stance in his paleness in his silence in his voice in his sighs in his expressions, so many things that simply and plainly told Jonathan that Will was just not okay.

He could tell by everything but his words, because Will never mentioned anything about it to him. And it made him feel so frustrated, because it was as if his brother, the person he loved the most in all the world, was vanishing from within his hands, and he was unable to stop it, to do something about it, to make him feel better, to heal him, to protect him. He wanted to stop seeing that fear behind those eyes and that crippling sensation he had whenever he thought no one else was looking and oh god it wasn't fair, none of this was fair, Will didn't deserve any of these, none of them deserved any of these.

"Listen...", he'd told him one evening as he drove him back from school, stopping the car in front of their house. Will had turned to look at him with a raised brow. "If there was something I was supposed to know, you'd tell me, right?"

Will stared at him for a moment. He blinked. "Right", he said with a nod that seemed too tight and far too forced.

"You promise?"

Will looked out of the window, fixing his attention on anything but Jonathan. "Yeah, sure".

If anything, that made Jonathan more restless. "Well, is there?"

"Is there what?", Will asked him.

"Is there something you'd like to tell me? You know you can tell me anything, Will".

Will looked at him again, silently. After a second that seemed to drag for far too long, he simply replied, "erm- no".

"No?", Jonathan pushed the issue further.

Will shrugged. "I don't know what to tell you, everything is fine, it's all good", Will said with a smile that seemed fake to Jonathan's eyes.

"Is it?". Jonathan asked him.

"It is!", Will said, a bit defensively. He looked through the window again, looking slightly uncomfortable and certainly annoyed at Jonathan's questions. "Can I leave now? I have homework to catch up on and-"

"Yes", Jonathan said with a sigh.

Will opened the door of the car, but Jonathan's voice stopped him. "Just-", he started.

His brother turned to look at him again and closed the door a fraction once again.

Jonathan swallowed, feeling a rush of sentiment taking over him. "I just need you to know that we love you", he cleared his throat, "mom and I".

Will's expressions softened, a small smile drawn over his face.

"Never forget about that. Always, no matter the circumstances nor the problems, you can always talk to us and we will always love you, that is never, ever going to change, okay, little one?", he said with a smile as well, feeling his eyes already welling up with tears. "You can always trust us, tell us anything, and I do mean anything you want to, you know that, don't you?"

Will nodded and he leaned closer, stopping for a moment to consider if it was the right thing to do, before wrapping his arms around Jonathan and hugging him tightly. "Thank you", Will whispered.

Jonathan allowed one, just one tiny tear to fall from his eye. He nodded and cleared his throat, a smile on his face as well.

And yet...

What had happened almost a year ago was so...unspoken, so undeclared, as if it was a curse to even think about it, as if it was forbidden to consider the possibility of the darkness' return, as if by doing so the forces lurking beneath would be summoned, as if talking about it was like a smear of blood splashing in the floor that would get the demogorgon's attention immediately.

And so they never talked about it, and Will looked worse and worse with every waking moment, and Jonathan felt useless and helpless and in moments like this one he couldn't help but feel like he was a burden, and he just wanted Will to stop looking the way he did. He just wanted Will to be happy and at peace.

But this was far from over.

It had been eleven months, and Jonathan had come to realize that despite the passing of time and the battling of memories within his brain, in which they were nothing but units of distance, life would never be the same again. Sometimes, he would look back at those fleeting moments when he was happy without knowing he was, when he had it all without knowing what he even wanted, when life seemed to be good and in place for just a single moment, because since that night of November 6th, life seemed to be nowhere else but in the Upside Down, the place that seemed to hold his memories, his nightmares, his fears, his secrets, and his brother's soul as well.

He wondered if life would go back to what it used to be, he wondered if he even wanted life to go back to how it used to be.

He didn't have an answer to any of those two questions.

And there was Nancy to worry about too.

Nancy wasn't okay either. He knew it. They hadn't talked to each other much since classes had started, mostly because he always left the room as soon as the bell rang and every time he did he could feel her eyes on him, piercing through, slashing through every single fortress in his body. She did seem to be okay with Steve, which was actually a very good thing, because-

Because, ever since Jonathan was a little kid he'd have this feature about him: he lived in cloud nine. He liked picturing a thousand scenarios in his head and they looked just as real as the photographs he snapped everyday. The dialogues, the circumstances, the situations, he would picture all of them. And ever since that November, Jonathan had kept wondering if everything that had happened between him and Nancy, with those small, fleeting signs, had just been the work of his mind playing tricks on him. And he'd go forwards and backwards, yes and no. Definitely yes one day, definitely no the other.

So seeing Nancy with Steve was good. Because it brought him back to reality, it reminded him of who he was and who she was and how life worked. And every time Steve would kiss her by the lockers and she would smile back and mutter an 'I love you', Jonathan realized that his mind was, effectively, quite active and accurate when it came to picturing scenarios that simply would never happen.

And so he made peace with the whole deal and accepted it as it was. And he didn't push it, but he felt the need to be as apart from her as possible.

Because accepting it was one thing, forgetting about it all was another deal completely.

And as it usually turns out, he didn't have control over his brain, and at any random moment, he would remember her, and her glances and her smiles and her hands, and it would *hurt* thinking about it.

Sometimes he felt like it was all coming down at once, crashing over him, like a wave in the ocean. He'd ignored it all: Will, Nancy, his

mom, his life, dismissed all the problems, thinking one day they would just leave: one day Will would be okay and one day he would forget about Nancy and one day his mom would be able to find some peace and one day the lights would blink and he wouldn't feel a panic attack creeping up on him, just like that, as if it was simply that easy, and then the waves got bigger as they crashed against the shore and he kept ignoring them because everything would be okay, until that one giant wave would come and destroy everything on its way. And one day, and one day and one day, but that day seemed further and further away as time passed, whereas at the same time, past seemed to be catching up to them, claiming back everything it had taken. Absorbing it like a wave.

"You're coming to this", she said one particular day on late October as they left their class.

She gave him that stupid invitation to the party, the one that said 'come and get sheet-faced', ugh.

And she'd smiled at him and she looked in such a good mood that he couldn't help but smile and oh god this was *such* a stupid idea but Nancy was holding one for herself which meant she was also considering going to it and that fact alone made everything far much more interesting and he felt infinitely curious about those stupid parties everyone seemed to love so much. But he hated parties. There was something so...nonsensical about them, there was this dire need to *pretend*, pretend and pretend, over and over, a thousand masks underneath, no one was their real themselves, in parties, everyone had something to prove to someone.

And she'd guessed right: a Vonnegut book and a Talking Heads album was an *excellent* idea for a Halloween night. Even better. No forced small talks, no socializing at all, not drinking nor seeing people pretending to be someone they were not while they drank while congratulating themselves for doing it, no ugly music...but no Nancy.

And no Nancy didn't sound particularly better.

Oh and there it was again: Steve kissing her against the lockers, which was okay. Of course, going to this party was an absolutely idiotic idea and he didn't know what was crossing his mind in that single second when he even considered the possibility of going, clearly something was wrong with his brain. He sighed quietly and walked away. This really was okay, it really was, it definitely was. Nancy and Steve looked happy and it was fine.

He walked out of school and tucked himself inside his car. As soon as he did, he sighed, feeling exhausted all of the sudden. He wished he could just pick up Will and go home, but Will had AV club, so he simply turned on the radio, as loud as he could, the sounds muffling the ever moving thoughts inside his brain and life seemed slightly better. He put the invitation on the side chair and kept riding. And riding. And riding, often stealing glances towards the paper Nancy had given him. It was okay. It was a stupid party anyway and he was so delusional for even considering the thought of it.

Wait. What had Nancy said right before Steve came and picked her up and kissed her? She'd said *you might meet someone*. Sure. That sounded like an even better idea, him at a party, unable to socialize nor interact with anyone *but* Nancy wanting him to meet someone. He did not need to meet anyone, he had *friends*. And what was the point anyway?

Ugh. So that settled it, then. She read him perfectly. She knew he felt lonely, she knew he needed someone and she wanted him to talk to people, to fall in love with someone else, because for them it was an impossibility. Simple as that.

He turned the volume of the radio louder. And rode and rode and rode.

There was a particular pond he liked to stare at. Sometimes, the little patterns the water drew whenever a leaf fell over it, managed to clear his mind like nothing ever did. The ride to the pond always took him about an hour, and no one knew it was his hiding place whenever life became too much.

He parked his car in front of the pond and left the radio playing

loudly, the front door opened, he leaned on his elbows and he stretched his legs and stared up at the sky, listening to the sounds the water made, the little drops of water mixing with the beat of the bass making him feel like he was not alone, like despite knowing there'd always be the threat of the Upside Down, there would always be the pond to calm him and remind him that he was alive, or as alive as he could be while the world seemed to be tumbling down around him. And that thought made him feel slightly, *slightly*, better. And he forced himself not to think about her.

If anything, the conversation he'd had with Will after he'd rented the movie and arrived to his room only unsettled him more. The way his brother had just...snapped, it felt as if he was trying to cover something up, something he definitely didn't want Jonathan to know, and why on Earth wouldn't he want him to know? He would always support Will, always.

Deep, deep down, Jonathan had to admit that he already knew. Deep, deep down, Jonathan had to admit he also already knew why Will didn't want him to know. Because he *knew*. Will knew what the whole situation was doing in Joyce and Jonathan and so he just let it all go, pretending that one day the Upside Down would simply disappear and everything would be okay but almost a year later, everything was nothing but.

And Zombie boy? People called Will Zombie Boy? Why hadn't he told him? It certainly had been a topic in his brother's mind, for he used it as a topic in his comics. He could only begin to imagine how this whole situation affected Will, he was a sensitive boy, and those things always took a toll on him. He remembered the look on his face whenever Lonnie and their mom had a fight, the way his face showed he was *crumbling* apart on the inside, the way he seemed to close himself from the rest of the world, isolate himself, so nothing and no one could hurt him, which was why Jonathan had decided to build Castle Byers with him when Lonnie left, so his brother wouldn't walk away, wouldn't isolate himself. Those situations were never easy for Will to assimilate, and now it wasn't any different, he was building

up a wall around himself, and not allowing Jonathan nor Joyce inside, and that was breaking Jonathan apart, bit by bit.

He couldn't focus on the movie he'd picked for them all to watch together. His eyes were fixed on the moving pictures, but it was as if his mind was in a kind of limbo. Not quite immersed within his thoughts, not quite immersed on reality itself. He hated that feeling, but lately it was as if, the more Will slipped into darkness, so did Jonathan.

It was getting harder to focus, harder to pretend like everything was alright, like they would be alright. Will didn't want to open himself to him. Didn't he know? Jonathan understood him perfectly, for he'd lived a life filled with insults and mockery from the rest of the world. He'd faced them alone. He would never want his brother to face them alone. He was not alone.

He fell asleep that night on the couch. The movie ended without him even realizing. By the time he woke up it was almost 3 a.m. and his neck ached. His mom had placed a blanket over him but he still felt cold, an odd kind of cold, as if the whole house was colder than the rest of Hawkins. It was unusual.

And so, he walked as fast as he could towards his room and buried himself under the blankets. A couple of minutes later, he listened to the loud 'bang' of a door opening and steps down the hallway that he immediately placed as Will's. And then the steps stopped, right by the living room. And then he heard the door of his house opening, the softest of creaks. Jonathan frowned and stood up, as silently as he could. The wind crushed against his window, it sounded as if someone was whistling in the middle of nowhere, as if that sound invaded the whole room. Outside, the branches of the trees snapped as they broke, the wind relentless, even though those kinds of winds were usual during this time of the year, that wind sounded...different. He couldn't tell why, it was different.

He opened the door of his room, just the tiniest bit. And he stood still as he stared at the horizon: the door of their house wide open, the wind blowing strong, the whole place was being hit by lightnings that were tainting the sky red, all of it red, so bright, so clear. And then,

in the middle of it all, Will standing in the living room.

Jonathan wanted to run towards him but he found he couldn't. His feet felt like they've rooted themselves to the ground, and he felt paralyzed by fear, he felt a shiver running down his neck, and he couldn't move. He *couldn't* move. Outside, the wind kept blowing a kind of sinister melody, it sounded like...like nothing he'd ever heard before and it was all red and Will. *Will*.

And suddenly, just like that, the door to their house was shut closed by the force of the wind, and it was all dark again, and the whistling stopped, and the branches weren't moving anymore, and Will, who had also seemed unable to move, to walk away, to react in any single way, he moved once again. Jonathan's panic seemed to have receded as well, somehow, and he had enough presence of mind to actually close the door as fast as he could before Will turned. He leaned his head against it and heard the sound of Will's footsteps down the hallway, walking away so softly, as if nothing had happened at all. Then the door to his brother's room closed.

He stood there, in the middle of the night, accompanied only by silence, a kind of silence that seemed to be intense enough to bury all the other sounds and the memories of what he'd experienced mere minutes ago. And so, the silence carried him on, and it was a silence so *loud* that after a while, Jonathan wondered if he had just imagined it all. Yes. Of course, that was the only answer. It was all so *silent*, nothing about what he'd just lived could have possibly been real. He repeated that thought to himself until he fell asleep again.

The next day, he confirmed it. Will acted as if absolutely nothing had happened at all. He seemed to be...a little on the edge, but he'd looked like that for a year, so it wasn't anything unusual. It must have been his imagination playing tricks on him, reminding him of why nothing could go back to normal, of how all of what they'd lived would haunt them. It was the only possible answer. It had to be.

Plus, the anniversary of Will's disappearance was approaching, slowly looming over them, going unspoken, even though he knew that Joyce and Will knew it well enough. Apparently, the doctor had warned Joyce that Will's memories would only become worse and worse

around this time, but maybe it wasn't only for Will, maybe the anniversary would bring them back to hell, the painful reminder of what they'd lived etched on their minds. And so he mentally prepared himself for what they would have to face, for the way their minds would play tricks on them, for the way their minds would wander between reality and the world of shadows, the distorted dystopia of what it could all be, the upside down.

Will only smiled bright as Joyce tried his costume on him. It was a perfect fit.

And Jonathan couldn't help but smile back. Hell might break loose and their minds might run out of control, but for now, for now, they still had Halloween, and Will still had one chance to be a kid once more.

8. Halloween, 1984

The party was *loud*. He turned off his car and sighed, leaning his head against the backseat, feeling as if he was getting ready to go into battle. He second-guessed himself, not quite certain this was a great idea, for mingling and drinking and talking to actual people was *not* something he was used to nor something he particularly enjoyed. He felt a crippling anxiety overtaking him but he ignored it, and for a second he wondered if he should just turn back and go home, or wait for Will at the Wheelers, because this was definitely *not* a good idea.

And in that moment, his brain screamed at him: *Nancy Wheeler will be there.*

And the rest of the doubts vanished, for there was only one fundamental and relevant truth and it was the fact that Nancy was going to be there, and it'd be the first time he'd see her outside of the school when they would not be hunting monsters or feeling the after effects of it, it would be the first time that they'd see each other in the context they were supposed to *belong* to: being teenagers, having fun, partying, drinking, living.

And if that thought wasn't enough to put a halt on all his questions and his anxiety, nothing else could.

He took a deep breath, closed his eyes and told himself everything would be alright.

He stepped out of the car feigning a confidence he didn't quite feel at the moment. He got this. He could do it. It was okay. He'd walk through that door and he'd see Nancy Wheeler again and it all would be fine.

And then the guy dressed up as an ancient Greek threw up right next to him.

He rolled his eyes. This. This was exactly what he meant when he told the other half of his brain that this was a terrible idea, because most teenagers his age were like this, and he just wasn't like that, he

didn't feel forced to act like everyone else because he didn't enjoy it, and he wasn't going to quell to external pressure.

He walked into the party.

He scanned the room fast, feeling like he didn't belong there. He didn't even have a Halloween costume on, he looked so out of place. And oh- there she was. She was beautiful and she looked happy and she looked fine and Steve was right next to her and they looked just fine.

Jonathan couldn't stop staring at her, at the way she danced, at her smile as she took a drink from the red cup, as she let herself go with the music.

Oh, she was so beautiful.

A girl approached him, Samantha, as she'd told him. After greeting her, he inwardly asked himself how on Earth hadn't he noticed she was dressed as Siouxsie from Siouxsie and the Banshees and the only thing he had thought of at the moment had been to ask her if she was dressed as a member of the band Kiss. What the hell was wrong with him? She looked at him with a smile and simply drank a bit more.

They talked for a while, mostly about how they didn't like parties and this was a bad idea and she kept smiling at him and she seemed like such an interesting person, like such a complex person, like she lived in her own, carefully constructed and kept world and in other circumstances he would have loved to talk to her and get to know her and surprisingly enough he felt good talking to her which was something he didn't manage to do with too many people and yet all he could think about was Nancy and while he absentmindedly talked to Samantha, he couldn't help but notice, out of the corner of his eye, that Nancy was drinking too much and when the song was over or when Steve was looking somewhere else or when she thought no one else was seeing, the smile vanished from her face and her eyes turned hazy and clouded, as if there was a heavy weight hanging from her back. But maybe that was just his imagination.

Then he lost Nancy from sight, he shook his head to clear his mind

and to be able to focus on the conversation he was holding with this wonderful, smart girl who liked the same music that he did and who seemed to see the world from a very similar perspective to his. He stared at her for a moment and smiled back because under different circumstances everything would be different, maybe in another universe. But in this reality the upside down existed and the threat of darkness chased after them and the only person he longed to talk to and to get to know and *love* was the one person who understood everything he'd gone through and who felt the aching loss he'd felt before and who had held his hand while they both fought the demogorgon. And God his heart ached, literally ached, for Nancy Wheeler, how did he allow this to happen? When did this happen? He wasn't used to this, this wasn't... This wasn't like him.

He sighed and nodded at whatever she'd just said. She smiled again.

Someone pushed him on their way out, he turned and saw Steve. Steve? clearing the tears from his eyes as he hastily walked towards the door. Jonathan frowned. Where was Nancy? What had happened? Was she okay? He needed to find her. He needed to see her and make sure she was okay. He shook his head. "Listen, it was wonderful getting to know you, but I have got to find a friend who's somewhere around here, a bit drunk, and who needs a little help. Talk to you later?", that was what people were supposed to say, wasn't it? and shockingly enough, he wouldn't mind talking to her again, he'd like to get to know her more, even to become friends.

"Yeah, see you later", she nodded with a smile, not looking discouraged at all, and walked away. He liked her rather a lot.

He couldn't walk faster, amidst the dancers and the drinkers and the music was pounding too loud. He walked out of the living room and into the hallway. "Nancy?", he asked, his ears ringing from the sudden absence of noise.

No reply.

He kept walking along the hallway. "Nancy?", he called again. He knocked on a door before opening it to... To two? Or three? People going at it in a bedroom. "Ugh!", he said before closing the door as

fast as he opened it. He blinked, shaking the mental image off his mind, and kept walking.

He knocked on another door and opened it.

Nancy was staring the mirror as if she was in shock. She simply was staring at her own face while she rubbed a towel over her stained sweater. Her eyes looked blurry, in that unmistakeable expression that told you immediately that the person had effectively had a bit too much to drink. And she *was* alone and drunk in this bathroom, he sniffed with rage. What if he hadn't come to the party? what if she had ended up here on her own, drunk out of her mind? this was... God he was so angry right now. But not at her. She looked so...young right there, staring at her face, and he could see her own mind burdened by memories and by internal conflicts that no teenager of their age should ever be worried nor affected by, and there it was again: the feeling that they were the only two people in the world who understood each other, who knew what the other was feeling, who knew the pain and the remorse and still felt the aching and stinging void of it. He loved her for it.

"Nancy?", he asked softly as he walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

She turned to look at him, her eyes were filled with tears. She frowned. "Jonathan?", she replied just as quietly.

Jonathan walked closer. "Are- are you okay?"

She seemed to lose the strength she had left in her body and almost fell. He grabbed her by the arm. "Oh, oh, careful there", he whispered as he held her and guided her towards a small seat next to the shower. She sat shakily and slumped her shoulders, looking down.

He crouched right in front of her, staring at her.

"It's all bullshit", she whispered.

"What is?", he asked with a frown.

Her eyes welled up with tears again, but when she spoke, her voice ached with rage. "All of it. My life, me and Steve. Everything around us while we pretend that everything is fine. It's all bullshit. We're all full of bullshit".

Jonathan couldn't reply to that, didn't know what to tell her. She was right. They couldn't keep pretending that it was all okay while guilt and pain and darkness consumed them.

He grabbed the towel she had been cleaning herself with, poured water over it and crouched again, placing two fingers under her chin and lifting her face, so they stared at each other. Her eyes were still filled with tears. Their eyes met. He lifted the towel and softly wiped the tears off her face. She stared at him silently. Jonathan couldn't focus on her piercing eyes, so he focused his whole attention on the task at hand, wiping carefully every trace of pain from Nancy's face.

"Yes. Yes we are", was all he replied as he finished cleaning her face.

She simply stared at him, frozen in the spot.

"How do you live with that?", she asked with a whisper, after a while.

"I don't", he replied, looking at the towel he kept folded on his lap, because staring at her seemed too raw, like he was pouring his whole heart right there in the open, and he couldn't, not quite, not yet. "I can't live with that. For the past year, I've felt like I've lived a life that does not belong to me. And it's not even a life, it can't be called that. It's the ghost of a life that isn't even mine", he bitterly laughed and shook his head. Nancy was the only person in the world he felt comfortable telling this to, even though he knew she was drunk and probably wouldn't remember anything the next day, it felt good to let it out, to just say it.

She placed her hand over his, right where he was holding the towel and he looked up to find her eyes. They simply stared at one another, a thousand unspoken words floating around in the air, their weight heavy against them both. Nancy looked down at the place where their hands were joined and frowned, as if she hadn't realized she'd placed her hand over his in the first place. Jonathan sat straight and

cleared his throat.

She blinked. "Neither can I", was all she said, lowly and soft, and admission only meant for Jonathan's ears.

He nodded. There was a strand of hair covering her eyes and so, before he could stop himself or second-guess himself, he reached over and pulled her hair behind her ear, before softly caressing her face. Nancy stared at him, a small intake of breath overtaking them, the only noise that they could hear at the moment. Jonathan smiled softly. They were both so freaking *broken*. And yet, they somehow got one another, in whichever way they had each other.

He stood up, still holding her hand. "Come on, let's get you home", he said quietly.

"Where's Steve?", she asked with a frown.

"He left", Jonathan replied.

"Oh", Nancy said with a sigh, but it was a somewhat different sigh, it didn't sound as if she was...sad per se, but mostly like she was...relieved.

He grabbed her hands and pulled her to stand up but she was too heavy and her balance too muddled by alcohol to actually be able to stand. "Woah, woah", he said, grabbing her by the waist and pulling her against him. She laughed, her eyes closed and her head leaned back.

He looked at her and couldn't help but smile back. She opened her eyes and their gazes met, and Jonathan realized then just how close they were to one another, their lips mere inches apart. She looked down and raised her hand to softly touch a point just over the rim of his sweater, over the collarbone, tracing the path of the bone. Jonathan looked down and swallowed, her fingers almost tickling his skin, but not quite, with feather-light touches. She looked up and their eyes met again and he had to take a deep breath before he might get lost amidst the blue of her eyes and the red of her lips and oh, if he just moved a bit, a little bit, they'd be kissing. He closed his

eyes for a moment, picturing how it would be like to kiss those lips. He felt overwhelmed by the feeling. When he opened them again, Nancy was just staring at him, her fingers still dancing over his skin.

Jonathan opened his mouth but no sound came out of it, only a deep breath. He cleared his throat and shook his head. No, it would never be like this, ever.

If he kissed Nancy Wheeler, he would do it softly, tenderly, he would take his time, tracing the silhouette of her lips, a soft press at first and growing more and more urgent as they slowly discovered each part of their mouths. He would pour all of his feelings in a single touch of their lips, and he would say those things that always hung in the air between them, but this time he'd say them with his lips against hers and he would let her know how desperately he wants to be with her, how he'd longed for that moment, how fortunate he is to be kissing her. He would let her know that she is not alone and that she is not going crazy, that he understands everything she feels because he feels it too and maybe, just maybe, together they'd find a bit of light amidst the darkness, a path to run away from the upside down before it swallowed them both.

If he kissed Nancy Wheeler, it would never be in a bathroom, in the midst of a loud and hideous party, while she's drunk and after she'd just fought with her boyfriend.

No. It would never be like that.

"Come on, Nance", he said, turning towards the bathroom door, without letting go of her hand. He didn't get to see her expression, couldn't tell if she was relieved or disappointed or if she had even realized of his absence at all. "Lean on me", Jonathan whispered as he wrapped his arm against her waist, "you okay?", he asked softly.

She had her eyes closed but managed to nod.

He opened the door and was struck again by the loud noise of the party. He hissed and pulled her tighter towards him, almost carrying her. They walked down the hallway together, passing by the threesome bedroom, when Nancy leaned her head against his

shoulder and stood there. Jonathan took a deep breath as they arrived at the living room, listening to some whispers as they made their way.

They walked past the dancers and the drinkers and after what seemed like an eternity, they got to the front door. Nancy squinted a bit at the cold air as the door opened and looked around, leaning more heavily against Jonathan, who stopped for a moment and looked down at her, feeling a full yet terribly hollow feeling in his heart, full because he was holding her in his arms and breathing that scent that was undeniably *hers* and which somehow made him feel at home, full because he could feel the warmth and the comfort she provided just by her mere presence, without even intending to, without doing anything, Jonathan felt calmer and more at ease just because she was there. But hollow, hollow because this was temporary, it was condemned to an unavoidable ending, and she was broken and so was he and oh god how much he wished he knew how to make it all better, to kiss the pain away.

She turned to look at him, her blue yet hazy eyes fixed into him before she said, "oh!" As she rummaged in the pocket of her skirt, producing the key to her house, which she handed to Jonathan with a smile. Jonathan couldn't help but smile back as he took it, dimly aware of the soft touch of their fingers when she gave him the key. She leaned her head against his shoulder and he eventually managed to place her in his car, wrapping the safety belt around her before sitting himself and turning on the car. When he turned to look at her, she was deep asleep already.

He took her to the Wheeler's and helped her out of the car. In their way to the house, Nancy, who was still half asleep, slipped and almost took Jonathan down with her. He struggled to help her up and tightened his arms around his waist, just as she wrapped her arms around his neck.

They made their way up the stairs silently, as silent as they could be with Nancy being drunk. Jonathan took her to her bedroom and God, he hadn't walked through those doors since the night they'd sleep at the same bed together, both needing the comfort of knowing somehow they were not alone amidst the looming darkness of the

upside down, although back then they didn't even call it the upside down, didn't even know what it was. He stopped at the door for a moment, looking around with a sigh, a rush of emotions hitting him all at once. Pain, heartache, loss, worry, love, quietness, something in between, something deeper than all of that.

He'd fallen in love with Nancy Wheeler in this bedroom. He was certain of that.

"It can't get us in here", he'd whispered to her as they laid on the bed. He felt somehow reassured because they were there, together, and together they were invincible. He sighed.

Back then he'd felt invincible, and now he was taking a broken Nancy back home after being stood up and left alone while drunk and sad and angry. Were they truly invincible? No, they were just two kids playing with forces that were bigger than them and lived to tell the tale. Others didn't. Others still lived with the consequences of it, like his brother.

He put her in bed. By then she was once again deeply asleep, her face contorted in some kind of feeling he couldn't put a name to, as if all was hurting, deep inside, and she was desperately trying to hide it, yet the feeling still managed to come to light. He took off her boots and tucked her under the blankets. He had a nagging feeling that he had to keep her safe, which was stupid, because she was strong and smart enough to keep herself safe, but he was just so worried about her. He didn't know what to do, how to help her. It can't get us in here, he'd said, but it got them, darkness absorbed them and dragged them in and somehow still threatened their lives. It can't get us in here, but it can, it could, it would probably do it again. It can't get us in here, but Barb died and Will was in pain and Jonathan and Nancy were collapsing bit by bit.

So by tucking her under the blankets, he was kind of telling himself that it couldn't get her in there, that they would be safe, and that they wouldn't be alone.

Just as he was about to walk away, he felt a hand wrapping around his arm. He looked down, transfixed by the moment. *A magnetic field is invisible. It's the creation of a magnet, that attracts the opposite pole of*

another magnet. Simple as that.

"Jonathan?", she asked.

He could feel her warmth, her touch, there, burning, attracting, sealing, scarring, there, so uniquely *hers*. Their eyes met, and when they did, he caught a glimpse of nothing but a storm, a cloudy, intense storm raging in her eyes. In that moment, more than ever, she looked utterly and completely *shattered*. He opened his mouth but no sound came out of it, for the second time in the night. In the end, he only managed a nod. And that was the last thing she saw before her eyes fell closed again and her hand slipped from his arm. He stood there for a moment before blinking and turning away, making his way to the door.

He stopped just as he was about to leave, staring at her for one moment more. God, she was so beautiful, so strong, but so- so broken. *I love you*, he thought at that second while time seemed to stop and hang there and there was nothing but the two of them. *It can't get you in here, I promise*. That was the last thing he thought in his mind before he went out and closed the door.

He leaned his head against the door, trying to compose himself. His heart was racing and his head was aching and he needed some goddamned sleep, he needed a break, he needed to *breathe*. He drew big gulps of air and yet it didn't feel like it was enough to fill his lungs. He stood there for another moment, gathering whatever strength he had left.

He walked down the stairs and into the basement. Mike and Will turned to look up at him at the same time, their expressions almost as gloomy as Jonathan was certain his was. He pretended not to notice. Instead, he plastered a terribly fake smile in his face. "Hey buddies, how was the trick or treating?", he asked.

Mike sighed and threw his head back against the couch. "Horrible".

Will smiled in an expression that Jonathan thought could be fake but couldn't be quite certain of before he said, "it wasn't so bad".

Mike turned to look at him with a small frown and Will met his eyes, shaking his head minutely, as if asking Mike to withhold some information, to hide something.

Jonathan frowned immediately. "What happened?"

Mike shrugged. "Nothing. Dustin and Lucas brought a new friend I didn't like. They were desperate to impress her and looked like idiots. It was boring. So Will and I came back home".

Almost imperceptibly, Mike's eyes turned towards a corner of the basement and his expression fell even further. Jonathan recognized that expression and realized immediately it was that he missed Eleven. He sighed. Addressing only Mike, he told him, as seriously as possible, "it will get better, I promise".

Mike frowned for a moment before blinking in recognition and nodding slightly. "Thank you", he whispered.

He walked towards Will and ruffled his hair a bit. "And did you have fun?"

Will smiled, "yes, it was good".

"Are you alright?", Jonathan asked him.

Will nodded with another smile. "Yes but, I was wondering if I could stay here tonight".

Mike smiled. "Yes. We will play with our Ataris and tell some scary stories. Is that okay?"

Jonathan stood for a moment, considering, before nodding. "Yes, fine, but no scary stories, I don't want you having nightmares tonight, and no more candies! and be ready tomorrow early when I pick you up for school, okay?"

Will stood up excitedly and hugged Jonathan, "thank you".

Jonathan held him back tightly, "you're welcome, little buddy".

"How was the party?", Will asked, a glint of mischief in his face.

Jonathan ruffled his hair with a smile. "Boring", he replied.

"Mike told me Nancy would be there", he said, Mike raised an eyebrow.

"She was. I gave her a ride back here", Jonathan replied.

Will nodded with a knowing smile and Jonathan tickled him a bit, just to get the smug smile off his face. Will laughed and asked him to stop and when he turned back to look at Mike, he saw a somber expression in his face. He truly missed the little girl, didn't he?

Jonathan gave Will another big hug, "be careful", he whispered against his ear, "I'll see you tomorrow".

"I will", he replied.

He said goodbye to Mike and walked out the door, longing to get into his car as soon as possible. Once there, he leaned against the back of the seat, just breathing deeply. This day had been too much. It all had been too much. And now he would come back home without Will and he would probably get little sleep while worrying about both Will and Nancy and he was so exhausted.

He started the car and through the journey back home all he could do was repeat to himself, *"it can't get them in there, it can't get them in there, it can't-"*.